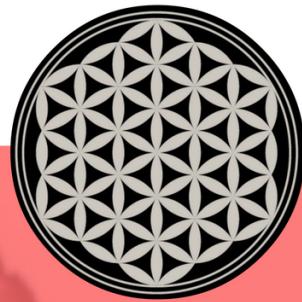


PUBLISHED BY TELEKINETIC PRESS



Val D'Orazio

THE END OF THE VAMPIRE CRAZE IN NEW YORK CITY

BOOK THREE

THE END OF THE VAMPIRE CRAZE IN NEW YORK CITY, Book Three

2016 Edition Published by Telekinetic Press

Story and characters copyright 2004-2006 by Val D'Orazio

www.butterflylanguage.com

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying or recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the author.

REVELATIONS

Before Tara knew it, she had spent almost nine months at Dermaco, and the rapidity with which the weeks passed, almost imperceptibly, shocked her. She had also gained about 20 pounds, which, as Pris gently reassured her, was pretty standard--unless you were one of the Undead, of course. Always the vampire had held out her offer to make the witch immortal. And Tara's apparent fatigue at being alive notwithstanding, as she spent more and more time at Dermaco, more and more time in the heart of the City, more and more time being inundated by the massive advertisements plastered to the sides of buildings and framed in bus shelters, advertisements that touted and glorified youth, beauty, money, and hedonism...as that quick, match-like *prana* of the area seeped into her consciousness and informed her dreams--okay, she was *considering* it, alright, leave it alone already!

The tenure of Amanda Tarantino coincidentally coincided with one of the biggest turnovers in staff in Dermaco's 30-year history. Tongues were wagging in the trade papers about the sudden changes in personnel, the abrupt comings and goings and goings. But Pris Baxter, who, in her role as second-most high-ranking staff member (after the departures of the rest of the VPs--the hiring of replacements for she had successfully helped stonewall), had taken it upon herself to publically contradict the nay-sayers. Pris's spin on the situation was not that Dermaco was becoming unstable or an unpleasant place to work at, but that the cosmetics company was simply in the process of finding itself, of weeding out the weaker links and bringing those persons with a "stronger alignment with the goals of new Dermaco into the fold. "Baby" Bersee, who outwardly seemed nonplussed--*oblivious*, really--to the sea-change that was happening to the tone and direction and leadership of his company and even to the DNA of his employees, spent most of his time either in his office talking to old Hollywood friends on the phone or out to lunch with old Hollywood friends. Much of the more

hands-on tasks and duties of being President/CEO Pros graciously took off his hands, making the ultimate sacrifice of her precious time so Bersee could massage those all-important connections with Susanne Pleshette and Anne Miller.

And one day the vampire called the witch into her office--interrupting a very intense bout of Mortal Kombat IX that the latter was playing on the new Playstation console fitted to her desk--and handed her another now-familiar thick manila envelope.

“Take care of this, will you?” Pris asked in a curt, businesslike manner, avoiding eye-contact as if what she was asking was so routine, so beneath even attributing to it the slightest bit of importance by maintaining an emotional connection, however brief, with its executor.

Halfway back to her office Tara produced a photo from the folder, and it was a black-and-white headshot of “Baby” Bersee. She immediately turned around, reentered the vampire’s office, and shut the door.

“Are...you...outofyourfreakingmind?!”

Pris was pretending to organize some files under her desk and did not look up.

“What,” she asked innocently.

“He’s the face of Dermaco, Pris! He’s the one the investors recognize!”

“‘Baby’ Bersee hasn’t read a prospectus or annual report to the stockholders in *years*,” the petite black-haired woman replied, lifting her head up to face her anxious assistant with a smirk. “The old boy’s been *physically* here but hasn’t ‘been’ here--get it? It’s *time*. Everybody here knows it. Everybody’s expecting it. I’m only doing what I’m supposed to do, what I was hired to do--the best thing for Dermaco.”

Tara threw the folder down on the desk, the impact rattling the contents of a silver mesh pencil cup.

“This is the *president of the company*, not simply some dickhead VP with a boner for the receptionist! To do what you’re asking me to do...goddamit, Pris, it’s got to be illegal!”

“*Everything* we’ve done has been illegal, Tara...that is, it *would* be if people actually believed in that occult mumbo-jumbo. But so what? How is it that much different from the other shenanigans and intrigues that take place in boardrooms and over lunchtime martinis all over the City, all over the world? And it’s not like I’m asking you to kill him...just...*convince* him. And have a seat, why don’t you, you’re making me all nervous, standing there pigeontoed...”

Tara reluctantly sat on the small chair, feeling the sweat from her anxiety soak her rayon suit at the armpits.

“Look--Bersee can be a bit of a histrionic queen sometimes, but he means well and he’s harmless and he’s just an old man...can’t you just let him make the decision to retire, or just make him the figurehead and just--“

The vampire was suddenly standing at Tara’s side, hands at her hips and looking rather stern. The witch fought the sudden urge to drop to the floor and sensuously lick her Manolos.

“Don’t tell me how to run my company, ‘Amanda’--I’ve been doing this a hell of a lot longer than you! I need to have control of this company. I *need* to. All of it. I need to so I can take it to the places it needs to go. I can’t do that with some lame duck getting photos in Cosmetics Weekly, getting all the glory. And as for him being a *harmless old man...*” Another edit to reality and Pris reappeared at her desk. “...that may be true. But what, I’m supposed to feel sorry for him, for the long, pampered life he’s had? He was a child star, did you know that? Of course you did, like the coot actually lets anybody at Dermaco forget. And he wasn’t under some Little Rascals curse or had parents who beat him, either. His mom and dad are both still alive in their 90s with no major illnesses, he gets along with them super, and goes back home to visit them every holiday including St. Patrick’s and Cinco de Maio. He also had the good fortune to be surrounded by friends, family, and co-workers who were either clueless or covertly supportive of his sexuality, and has fucked all the sweet ass he’s wanted, angst-free, since he was a teenager all the way to the present day.

“Right now that lizard has a young horse-dicked buck sharing his bed, looks like Brad Pitt with big blue Disney eyes. That’s right, picture old Bersee

fucking that perfect tight lovely butt--that's what you can do when your life is *charmed*. And of course it's all hush-hush and at the same time in your face, winked at and made excuses for, depending on the occasion. And you'll never see "Baby" at any Queer Pride rally, never see him complaining to Congress about gay marriage rights or AIDS funding--because things are just fine for him--for *him*--the way they are and he doesn't want to rock the boat. Such a perfect life, such a perfect glittering long life--and all this and a *company* too!

"You know what the biggest tragedy of his life was? The biggest tragedy of his life was when, after an eleven-year multi-million dollar career, he, at the age of 16, had his contract let go at MGM and had to suffer the indignity of television. It was devastating--*devastating!*--for him, he'll tell you the stories in his office, surrounded by all his memorabilia, surrounded by goddamn dolls of himself, with tears in his eyes. And so, though what he *really* wanted was to be the next Paul Newman, he had to settle for a 8-year gig on a successful television sitcom--that was the biggest tragedy of "Baby" Bersee's life." Pris seemingly instantly now stood directly in front of Tara, squeezed in between her seated assistant and her desk; the witch was used to her boss's unearthly movements, but for some reason this particular move made her almost jump out of the chair. "You know what I was doing at 16? *Do you?* I was *buried* at 16. I am *still* living 16. I will *always* live 16. So I say: *fuck* Bersee. Nice guy, you're right--pleasant enough, always generous on Christmas time--but fuck him anyway. I just don't care. I don't want to hear it. Just do what you have to do, what you're *hired* to do, and please don't question my judgment. Pretty please." Pris was again back at her seat, a long sliver pen in her hand as if she was ready to write something, as if everything was normal. "Thanks. I'll see you later."

Tara found some difficulty in getting out of the seat--it was strange, as if she was drunk, stoned, confused. She couldn't quite put her finger on what it was, what prevented her from doing such an easy task. She could hear the sound of Pris's pen against paper, hear it distinctly and then the noise from outside the window, the muted roar of the City, of Times Square asserting itself, filling the witch's ears and further clouding her judgment. Then, suddenly it hit

her--she was insulted and resentful!

“But Pris--what if I *don’t want* to hex Bersee? What if I just won’t do it? You know?”

Mmrreow.

Pris stopped writing and flashed an overly-polite, fang-tipped smile at her assistant.

“Well, if you won’t do it--I guess I’ll have to fire you.”

“Then fire me.”

“I don’t want to fire you.”

“Then maybe I’ll quit.”

“Hahaha..no, I don’t think so.”

“You don’t huh?”

“No, I don’t.”

“You gonna stop me?”

“This is silly, Tara...”

“Amanda.”

“Look--“

“If I walk out of here right now, what are you going to do about it?”

“What do you mean, what am I going to do about it?”

“I just split, what then? Today. What happens?”

“I can’t have you leave, Tara--you know that.”

“Oh, *really*?“

“*Really*,” Pris answered with a dangerous edge to her voice.

“So what will you do, you’ll have all your league of undead market researchers and graphic designers all up on my ass? And so then what, then I’ve got to get all crazy, and pretty soon before you know it, everything’s gone to fucking hell, and--nobody wins. I say you just accept my resignation and be done with it. What do you think? Do I need to write a letter first, is that the procedure?” The witch reached inside her bra and pulled out a pair of cards. “and these, do I give them to you or to HR in person? Or is it Facilities I give them to?”

Pris sat back in her tall chair and studied the woman sitting across from

her whose body language and demeanor had changed during the last fifteen minutes from Jimmy Stewart to Joe Pesci. She considered immediately just possessing her mind--but such a procedure seemed rash, *gauche* even. Then there was always the option of sending 50, 60 employees of the *Kin* to just finish her off, just as the witch herself had suggested. But such a being who could influence reality itself with a few chants--and whatever else the hell she did to Desjardins and all those other many many employees--did the vampire really want to open up such a can of worms, did she want to risk exposing Dermaco to some occult vengeance that could end up literally turning the company into a pumpkin, and her empire into a mousehole? But most of all--and here was the thing that absolutely frosted her bowels, no doubt about it--she actually *liked* Tara. She never had any real relationships with women in her life, except for her mom, who was buried beside her so many years ago but was not fortunate enough to have received the Gift--

Things had gotten so comfortable, now. Things were so perfect! Oh, *why* was this upstart flibbertigibbet trying to mess things up?! Why can't people just be happy with what they have and just shut the fuck up?

But then the vampire wound her way out of the snares and tangles of sentiment and back into iron-eyed business mode. It was obvious what was happening. There were two types of employees in her experience: the *stone-colds* and the *emotional fools*. The stone-colds operated completely on the basis of achieving as much material reward as possible, were forever comparing their salaries and benefits and bonuses to that of their co-workers, and cared not a damn about how they were liked by others as long as upper management smiled upon them and kept giving them their "due." Emotional fools, on the other hand, wanted to be loved and appreciated--and such employees could be quite cost-effective and inexpensive to retain and make happy. The irony, of course, was while the emotional fool did not place as many monetary demands on upper management, opting instead for pats on the head and the illusion of "family," they were also not that very respected by the selfsame upper management for that very reason. Because of course, whom would you rather have fighting for your

accounts and pushing your producers--a singleminded stone-cold who would squeeze every last puny cent out for you with no thought of anything else, or some mushy-hearted creampuff?

And Tara--Pris spotted it, spotted it right past all the many ramparts and defenses and cynicisms placed in the way, spotted it past the tarp and barbed wire and pongee sticks and citronella candles and mousetraps--at her core was a mushy-hearted creampuff, the vampire was almost sure of it. But there was also a mercenary quality about the witch--obviously or she wouldn't have allowed herself to be under such an employment as this--that did not run as deep but was more active and accessible. She would have to be attacked on both fronts.

The vampire put a long white finger to her thin red lips in thought for a second, then nodded and reached under the desk. Tara, watching her, entertained the brief, darkly humorous notion that perhaps she was reaching for a gun; but instead Pris handed the dumbstruck witch a small dark blue box with a white satin ribbon professionally tied around it.

"I was saving this for Christmas, but...you forced my hand. Think of it as your Thanksgiving present, instead."

Tara immediately recognized the make of the box, and cooed and grasped just like any stereotypical woman, as if there wasn't a pea in her head,

"Hepburn's! Geez, this must have cost you a fortune--"

"You don't even know what it is yet," replied the vampire playfully, savoring the sudden drop of pressure in the room, "open it!"

Pris beamed in her tall chair as the witch eagerly yanked off the ribbon and nearly tore the lid of the box in two to access the prize inside. It was a diamond-studded pentagram, as big as a half-dollar, on a chain of white gold.

"Bling!"

"Yes, Tara," the vampire said nurturingly, "*bling*."

"Bling! Wow...I've never *had* bling before. I never really thought about *buying* bling...it always seemed like the type of thing you got as a present, you know, like you were a loser if you bought it for yourself. Wow...bling!" The witch's mind sunk to the level of not a particularly gifted 8-year-old receiving a life-sized

stuffed pony on wheels for her birthday: “*Thanks, Pris!*”

“Not a problem,” answered the vampire in serene benevolence.

“I didn’t even know that Hepburn’s *made* occult jewelry...”

“Oh, they’ll give you a solid-gold swastika paperweight if you pay them enough. But anyway...this is just my way of letting you know...I *appreciate* you, Tara.”

The tall brunette kicked at the carpet humbly with her black pumps in an “aw shucks” gesture while at the same time stuffing the bling in her bra.

“C’mon, Pris...you give me enough already...no need to go through all this...”

The vampire lifted the manila folder up off the Lucite surface of her desk with both hands and looked at Tara expectantly, careful not to appear imperious in the process but, rather, affable and unthreatening in a Bob Saget sort of way.

Before the witch left the office, folder and bling in tow, she had the craziest, most random thought pop into her head. To even mention it seemed quite insane, and yet a deep part of her realized it was the “right” time to do it, even though there was no rhyme or reason behind it.

“Uh, Pris?”

“Yes,” the vampire answered, fingering the small blue gift box Tara had left on her desk, hoping to God (as *if*) that her assistant was not having another brain fart or hissy fit--because the next step after the bling was either a lobotomy or tearing her throat out before she ever reached the watercooler. Or buying her a car.

“I don’t think I ever mentioned this to you, about this cool thing I used to do...I can’t believe its never come up after all these months, but to be honest, I just haven’t thought about doing it in a long time. Also, I’m just not as good at it as I used to be. But I thought you’d get a kick out of it.”

Pris cocked a black eyebrow.

“Uh, it’s not *sexual* or anything like that,” Tara hastily clarified. “I know, it sounds like I’m talking about anal, or something. But no..uh..ready? Here goes...”

And with that the witch morphed into Pris.

The vampire's small jaw dropped open, her unique and pointy dental attributes in full view. Her ice-blue eyes were riveted to the sight before her--her petite form draped in Tara's black, now-enormous suit jacket, the skirt having fallen to the floor due to the drastic change in hip size--and she remained completely frozen accept for a queer, mouselike twitching of her nose, which was not a usual facial movement for her and which made her assistant wonder if perhaps this wasn't such a good idea. Then--

Pris laughed. She laughed and laughed and laughed and the bell-like sound rattled the fillings in Tara's mouth with its vibrations. The vampire laughed long, laughed hard, almost threw herself out of her chair in the ardor of her convulsive guffawing. She laughed until she almost wept, laughed until she looked like she was in agony, laughed and flung her small white hand over her heart as if to still that long-unbeating organ.

*** *** ***

While Tara Amadeo was on the verge of pulling one of the boldest (and dare I say--original?) coups in the history of the cosmetics industry, Mia Cefalu was on her way to meet up with Gabriel in the Museum of Modern Art. She strode confidently down Fifth Avenue in a short denim skirt, a tight white cable-knit black sweater with a lush, oversized collar, and knee-length high-heeled black leather boots. The stares and whistles that she received from truckers and businessmen alike no longer fazed her, no longer filled her with a thousand negative feelings of fear, anger, and anxiety--because she now realized that these individuals were only human, just like the rest of them were, just meat.

The last nine months, ever since ending the life of Myra Banes, were some of the most productive and vital of her entire life. Stalking and killing and drinking the blood of the creature whose actions had brought her so low, whose actions almost destroyed her--it fulfilled a very primal vengeance component of the human psyche, a vestigial bump at the back of the skull that had survived intact since the time of the dinosaur and which, in the case of the vampire, had

more prominence than any mammalian add-on. And she suffered not a twinge of guilt when Frank was briefly considered a suspect in the murder investigation, when the investigators found the copious writings in the dead girl's apartment regarding him, her "Bright Sun," and, more damning still, the several letters written in his deliberate, oddly feminine handwriting. It was good to see Frank suffer for this--to directly suffer, not merely to claim "mental exhaustion" as the indirect result of any direct suffering his wife experienced. She took a particularly sadistic glee in seeing him stuck at home, stoned on the doctor-prescribed tranquilizers that were slowly addicting his neurons, watching Judge Judy and Apex Tech advertisements on the T.V. while he had to sit out his temporary suspension from the force. The exquisite justice--it might have been why she let him live, why she never thought of just gorging on his jugular even in her most famished of moments--living, *human* living, was so much more painful.

But lest you think our Mia was wasting the nascent months of her true vampirism merely ruminating over issues of revenge and the past--the vampire was always a very intelligent, inquisitive woman, and she put such traits to good use in her Second Life. Shore's End, which, in her human days, seemed like such a banal sepulchral hell, now shone out to the striking brunette in all its wonder. Shore's End--it was full of people, people she never noticed before, people she always edited out of her frame of reference either because she felt too inferior to them or they seemed to be staid and conservative for her. Now--would you believe it--she was actually going to parties, she was actually on neighborhood committees and participating in activities. That her second Life would lead to such an increased presence and interest in the social scene of Shore's End--it was the very last thing she expected, but that's life for you, First and Second both. And it seemed to flow so naturally, doors seemed to magically open up and people bid her enter (which they *had* to do, or else she wouldn't have been able to enter), friends of friends of friends would be introduced to her and thus she saw her pool of acquaintances grow and grow...and in the beginning, before her turning, she hardly had any friends at all there, she barely knew Mrs. Kowalski on more than a superficial "may I borrow your rice" basis.

Poor Mrs. Kowalski.

*** *** ***

Mia entered the realm of the modernists and began to seek out *Les Mademoiselles D'Avignon*, where Gabriel said he'd be. Was she travelling backwards in the chronology? There was Dali's Persistence of Memory, so surprisingly small and fragile behind the glass--was Dali before Picasso? Were they contemporaries? In another life, her First Life, she used to know these things. She remembered going to the MOMA on her lunch breaks when she was a receptionist, right out of college...she always accepted those goddamn receptionist and clerk and assistant jobs, in essence secretarial positions one and all, on the hope and promise and dream that she would work her way up the ladder to bigger and better things. That was the way things were *supposed* to work out--what she read, and witnessed in movies--but it was never what actually happened, at least not to her. It all made her feel like such an incompetent, *worthless* creature. And so Mia would go to the museum and attempt to relive some of those halcyon days in the university, when she actually *had* something, had things like dreams and potential and talent. And the rush of emotions that would flood her person, amongst giant canvases and tourists who seemed so much more sophisticated and happy than her, and people--the successful, the artists, the academics, the independently wealthy or self-employed or at the very least self-realized--who all seemed so much more happy and comfortable and optimistic and beautiful and comfortable in their clothes than her. She felt so ugly in that suit, so out of place amongst the spirit of creativity and innovation and rebellion of those displayed works; and then, after the too-brief 45 minutes or so were over and she had to head back, how ugly she felt at her job--ugly as a person. They always complimented her on the fucking suit.

Warhol?!

She worked her way back through the rooms, back, back, back, carefully back until she spotted Gabriel standing in front of the large Picasso canvas, ignoring

the plain rectangular wooden bench that existed behind him, empty. He looked rather small, standing there, seeing him only from the back, sandy hair rumpled like wind-blown wheat, still wearing that same periwinkle-blue hoodie. He looked small, and Mia wondered if perhaps it was a trick of the light that did it, that achieved the effect, or just simply the fact that he was shown before such a big painting.

Yes, he appeared a bit shorter than she remembered, and she hadn't seen him in a while. After the official death of her First Life, and the dawning of the Second, and the killing of the Creature, and her sudden involvement in Shore's End (which happened like an accident, she didn't plan for it)...it wasn't like she stopped speaking to Gabriel, or that she stopped inviting him over the house. Days just piled up, was all, and to-dos postponed and she just figured he had other things to do just like she did. Which made the call she got from him, seemingly out of the blue, a bit of a surprise, though it really shouldn't have been, because they were still friends and there was never a time when she considered their friendship over--though perhaps the relationship they had, in those strange, terrifying, and sometimes quite wonderful months after her turning, had faded out. And if that was the case, if it *did* fade out, it didn't really bother her, and that was a refreshing change, it seemed to signal some new level of emotional maturity for her. It was as if the slaying of the whoring creature was the last lick of a torrential emotional nature, and that all the desperation and agonies and tears she suffered in the pursuit and maintenance of Love had bled away along with that bitch's worthless life; and in its place stood a rational, reasonable, even-tempered woman who stood in the full tallness of her stature, and enjoyed and negotiated relationships with a free, calm, uncontrolling heart. She wondered if Gabriel would notice the change in her.

It was going to be cool seeing him again, Mia thought. And here he was, this little thing, arms hanging idly at his sides, resting on one sneakered foot and standing in front of *Les Mademoiselles D'Avignon*.

He turned before she even said anything.

"I knew it was you," he said with a twinkle in his pale blue eyes. "I just had

that feeling--that familiar old feeling--in the back of my neck, and I knew."

*** *** ***

The two sat side-by-side on the wooden, backless bench, regulating their conversation from topics mundane to controversial depending on whether there were people nearby. There was something different about Gabriel, Mia thought, something--like he wasn't the same person somehow. She felt a queer sort of distance, objectivity--what it felt like--was like--

Was like she was talking to a 15-year-old boy.

"How are you," Gabriel asked with an enthusiasm that took Mia aback, though it wasn't said with any more notability or exaggeration than any other person would show.

"Oh, I'm great, doing really great..."

"You *look* great."

"I *feel* great," she replied, and what a wonderful feeling it was to finally be able to answer such a question in the affirmative and actually mean it.

"So you are enjoying your Second Life then," the little vampire said, noting with a slight nod of his head the passel of young Italian tourists, scruffy and backpack-laden, that had just exited the room, leaving it free, if only for a moment, for just the two of them.

"Very much so."

"Better than the First?" This question was an old saw in vampire circles, a joke really, because all vampires knew that the 2nd was an infinity better than the 1st--though of course they were operating from the complete, inescapable immersal of the 2nd when answering it.

"I had no life in the First," the tall brunette answered, using her pale hand to tuck a stand of her long, flowing, chestnut hair behind her ear. "There's no comparison. After my first...*feeding*...everything was completely different. It was like a weight was taken off my shoulders."

Gabriel smiled knowingly.

“It was a good kill, yes?”

“The best--and it was an *enemy*, too.”

“Doubly-sweet.”

“Yes--and--anyway, it’s like a whole new world has opened up for me. I know that sounds corny, like a Walt Disney song, but...“ A pair of well-dressed old ladies who smelt of baby powder and thick, aged, blood strolled into the room. “And you know, I used to feel sick all the time, before all this happened to me, I used to have all these aches and pains and never feel right physically--and now all the pain and discomfort is *gone*.” Her dark golden eyes widened as if witnessing a magic trick. “I feel--my body feels--so *right*, you know. I can’t even remember what ‘sick’ feels like. You know, like a cold or a flu--I can’t even remember what that used to feel like, not even a stuffy nose. I can’t even relate to the words. It’s pretty neat. You know...except for those times, when I’m hungering and stuff. That can kinda hurt.”

“Are you eating enough every day?” the little vampire asked in concern.

“I really try to make an effort.”

“That’s good, that’s good.”

“But you know what the best thing is?” Mia laced the fingers of each of her hands into the other and flexed and relaxed, flexed and relaxed. “The best thing is, nobody takes advantage of me anymore. No one even *dares*--it’s like on some level they know what I am. Not that I scare them with my very presence or try to be intimidating or anything like that--to the contrary, I get along *great* with people--but they just treat me better. It’s like they sense the predator within me, and they respect it. People respect predators, I’ve learned that. The gentle, they scorn, they hate unconsciously and irrationally. Why do they do that to the gentle, the mild, the nice, the polite? Sometimes I think it’s because Darwin’s really right, it is all about the supremacy of the fittest. Maybe when the gentle are picked on, are overlooked, are targeted, it’s the species’ way of selecting things out...” Mia was now talking to the painting more than she was talking to the boy next to her; she had a faraway look in her eyes, as if she was working something out, justifying something, and, by so doing, justifying a whole lot. She scratched the edge of her

mouth. "What I always used to hate the most, hated more than the most in-your-face bully, were the ones that tried to appear so *civilized*, so jovial, so good-natured, and yet were killing you with 'harmless,' cutting comments. The ones that would make you the butt of their 'harmless' little jokes, purposely lying or putting you on about something just so they could make you look like an idiot. Or just say something to you that was insulting, but saying it so harmless, so lightly as if the insult wasn't an insult at all, not meant to be taken seriously--like you had no right to be insulted. It was all so *harmless*, all a joke--things they did because you were gentle and they just hated you for it, wanted to destroy that quality, hoping you would join their club of miserable hateful bastards. Those people--no, those people don't bother me anymore. I've beaten them." She turned away from the painting and said apologetically to Gabriel: "I know it's petty, I know it's unbecoming for vampire to still obsess over First Life issues--and I don't, I try not to."

Gabriel shook his head and grinned.

"Don't worry about it. We all have First Life stuff we think about from time to time. Not a big deal at all--and I *like* to hear you talk. So don't worry about it. Besides-- in 500 years, who will know the difference?"

"That's so weird...that I might actually still be alive in 500 years."

The old ladies were now two paintings away from them, and one in a mannish tweed feathered hat casted a quizzical look Mia's way.

"Of course you'll be alive, Mia--just do everything like I taught you. Just play it safe. No reason we all can't be Methuzelahs. Not like we're going to look like--*that*." He gestured with his thumb at the elderly women, and Mia tried to stifle a giggle. The little vampire waggled his eyebrows mischievously, then stopped, softened his expression, softened that angel's face, and gentle squeezed the brunette's hand. "I like it when you laugh--you look very pretty."

A wave of confusion hit Mia at Gabriel's touch. She felt uncomfortable, cold--and she didn't know why. It wasn't the same old thing--the same old feelings. Her emotions just felt completely blunted. And yet she tried to play along, to appear as if everything was fine, unchanged--normal, whatever normal

was.

"Thanks, Gabe," she replied, moving her hand as casually away from his as possible, using it to tuck another strand of hair behind her ear.

"I'm glad you're okay--I hadn't heard from you in a while, and I was worried about you." His face took on an aspect of gravity. "You weren't *mad* at me, were you?"

Mia regarded the serious little man who sat next to her and shook her head.

"Of course not...how could I be mad at you? You've never given me a reason to be mad."

The sandy-haired vampire bent his knee and brought one sneakered foot up on the bench. He looked away from Mia and undid and redid his laces.

"Well, I'm glad. I would have felt very weird if you were mad at me or something...I really missed you, you know."

"Oh Gabriel," Mia said, giving the top of his busily working hands a quick, friendly pat. "*I missed you, too.*"

*** * * * *

Gabriel offered to walk Mia to the train station, but she said he needn't go through all the trouble--besides, she planned to hit Fifth and do a bit of shopping, since she was in the neighborhood. So he walked her to right outside the MOMA, under scaffolding, and they exchanged some more pleasant talk, then got ready to part. The little vampire inquired if perhaps he could stop by the house at Shore's End one of these days, just to hang out, and Mia said they were doing some remodeling now in the living room and such, but maybe a little later.

And so they said their goodbyes, and when the tall brunette motioned to give him a hug, Gabriel awkwardly, instinctually, embraced her, pulled her to him until he could feel her body press up against the scars on his heart, embraced her with an intensity so that she didn't know quite what to do with her arms, which at first were held out in front of her and then settled maternally around his

back and atop his head. And Gabriel savored it, being so close to her, savoring the scent created by the mixing of her hair, the Victorian Allure, and her own unique aromatic signature of suspended life combined with the softness of her sweater, the reassuring chill of her skin. And he could see, past her shoulder, across the street by the library, the Hunter--the Hunter in his non-descript grey wool trench coat, a bag slung across his back, his blond/white hair short and unruly, his face so lined, his skin so petrified, and those ice-blue eyes staring back at him--Gabriel knew he was looking at him--in judgment.

*** *** ***

Malcolm Dust's girlfriend Debbie Tran made the unusual move of inviting him out for dinner--it felt strange having her call and just ask him like that. He pressed her on the phone for details but she was evasive, simply stating that she just wanted to have dinner with him, surely that wasn't such a big deal that it warranted an interrogation. Malcolm--who had been a big fan of Sherlock Holmes (and--fuck it--Encyclopedia Brown as well) when he was a kid, how the detective could "read" all the many elements of a person and a situation and put the crime together--analyzed every apparent waver in Debbie's voice, every pause, every specific word she used, everything, trying to deduce an answer. And though there wasn't enough there in the call to make a definite conclusion, he knew it could be only one of two things: she was either going to go the Sadie Hawkins route and propose marriage, or break up with him.

The slight-statured man cut off the water with one sharp, downward motion of his hand, wrenched the shower curtain (patterned in playing cards) open, stepped out of the tub that still bore the light-brown scorch marks from the boxes of boxes incident, and pressed a pale blue towel to his wet, flushed, freshly-shaven face for a couple of minutes, standing naked on the black-and-white bathroom rug, the water rolling off his soft, untoned skin and seeping into the polyester fringes. A silent decision to go on with the night, and then he set to dress himself immaculately, ripping the dry-cleaner plastic off of a folded pair of

gray slacks, buttoning the cuffs of a well-tailored black cotton shirt, pulling up a pair of suspenders, and quickly buffing a pair of shoes with the side of his hand. Then he neatly combed his receding hair in the bathroom mirror, tousled it slightly around the bangs so that he didn't look like a pointdexter, went before his tapestry of Baphomet, begged on his hands and knees by every sacred infernal text he had ever studied and revered for the Dark One to please not have this night end the way he suspected it would, got back up, brushed off his knees, checked his image in the glass one more time, carefully placed his antique fedora on his head, grabbed an overcoat, and headed up the steps.

He was meeting Debbie at Happy Chow's, an old-school Chinese restaurant that he loved that was tucked away obscure in a Midtown side-street hell of discount stores and clothing wholesalers. Chow's looked as if it hadn't a stitch of furniture replaced or decor updated since the 1940s, which was probably accurate. The lushly-patterned wallpaper had a strong yellowish cast to it and hung off in some places, revealing a sad grayish-white stuccoed wall underneath. The tables were hewn from a rich, dark mahogany inlaid with pictures of fans, the surface pitted and scratched and crazed and engraved in initials and crude sayings, and the chairs were sumptuously upholstered in shiny burgundy leather that was slashed and gouged in places, leaking foam. Large framed tableaus rendered in simple brush strokes of idealized peasant life in the mother country covered the walls, its canvases overtaken from the edges spreading inward by creeping yellow-brown moisture damage, and a monstrous wooden Buddha with dollar bills laminated in jaundiced tape affixed to its belly greeted the patron by the tall, antiquated cash register; this Buddha was not serene but animated, *agitated*, his arms raised above his head, his hands bent in a strange, swaying, vaguely occult gesture and his eyes carved wide and rolling in his skull, like a dragon.

Malcolm reveled in the sinisterness of it all, the implied mystery, the formally-dressed, grim-faced waiters with their shellacked salt-and-pepper hair, that atmosphere where it felt like just around the corner Myrna Loy in full Dragon Lady drag might spring forth--

Debbie smiled at Malcolm as he stepped in and crisply waved her hand at him.

*** *** ***

After two orders of beef and broccoli were given and beer served Malcolm dunked a twisted orange fried noodle in a small bowl of duck sauce and commented,

“You know, originally these were made for the soup--you’d just drop these suckers in the soup and let it get all soaked in the broth and just eat it up. Made a hearty soup. But people just kept eating them plain, as snacks, like chips or something. They simply refused to put them in the soup. And so that’s how the idea of putting these out as appetizers with the duck sauce came about.”

Debbie, her long, thick black hair pulled up in a multi-braid bun at the back of her head, fidgeted with the overly-long sleeve of her finely-woven coral mohair sweater that hung prettily over her elegant, slender frame and asked,

“Really?”

“Nah, I don’t really know that for sure--but that’s what I figured. A *conjecture*.” He tossed the noodle in his mouth. “So what’s the occasion, Deb?”

“What do you mean?”

“You never call and ask me out. I always call and ask *you* out. It’s not a male-chauvinism thing, it’s just the pattern we established for ourselves. But you calling me up one night and asking me if I wanted to have dinner at Happy Chow’s...” His watery blue eyes fixed on her large black-brown ones. “...now *that’s* a deviation of the pattern. An *anomaly*. So there must be some reason behind it, some occasion striking enough to break the pattern. So I’m just curious as to what it is.” Malcolm was calm, controlled, dipping another noodle in the sauce and eating it, then immediately grabbing another one, dipping, and eating. His words were controlled and measured, but deep down he knew how this night was going to end, he knew he just stepped into a situation that was going to be resolved with his balls rent from his body, that he stepped into an ambush. No,

not exactly an ambush. "Ambush" implied being taken off guard, surprised. There were a dozen little hints over the last several weeks, anomalies so subtle you'd just about miss them, that informed Malcolm with a degree of certainty how this night was going to end, how this dinner as going to end. He was just there in the restaurant to live it out, was all, like a play, and so he couldn't feel too surprised or shocked or angry or anything but a queer detachment marked by the very slightest trace of repressed emotion.

He wanted to hear it from her lips, wanted to hear it all, out of curiosity, just so he could say that he was *there*.

Debbie's eyes ran searchingly over the worn and pitted surface of the table. Then she blurted out,

"Malcolm, what are you doing with your life?"

The dirty-blond felt a radiating heat expand just under his heart.

"Deb, you *know* what I'm doing with my life. I have a store, and I sell shit. That's what I'm doing. Oh yeah, I'm also on a spiritual path--though I'm sure that doesn't qualify as 'doing' something to you or anybody else." He grabbed a handful of noodle fragments from the bottom of the basket. "But it's important to *me*."

"But the store...it's not stable. You know how high the rents are getting. What if you can't afford it anymore? What are you going to do then? What skills can you bring?"

"*Selling* skills--I have selling skills. You think it's just running a freakin' credit card through a machine and that's it, that's all I do? I bookkeep, I order, I keep inventory, I banter lightly with customers, and I open that store every day and I close it and I'm *responsible*. So I guess worst-case scenario, I open another store if Lord of Illusions goes. But it's not. Going, I mean. It's fine." This is it, the thumbscrews, that feeling of compressed air crushing from above--

"But you'll never be...comfortable with the income from that. You'll never have a savings, you'll just be living on whatever is leftover from bills every month. It's like...you don't have a plan. Everybody needs a plan nowadays, a good solid plan. It's like the store is really not a business to you it's just....a 'fun place.'" And

when she said it, it sounded like one word, spit out disdainfully from her mouth: *funplace*. She took a sip of beer from the plastic tumbler before her, avoiding Malcolm's eyes, grasping for words, trying to sort through all the various issues that she wanted to touch upon, trying to find a way to put them as tactfully as possible--"And that whole Satanism thing--it's just too crazy, Malcolm. It's crazy. Like, it's a fantasy."

Malcolm took a deep breath before he began.

"You knew that I was a Luciferian--*Luciferian*, not Satanist--when you met me. You went home with me, we made love in front of my friggin' altar, for pete's sake. You saw my books, I told you my philosophy, and you said you were cool with it. You even said it was 'neat.' *Your* word: 'neat.'"

"Yes, but I thought you were kidding about all of it, like it was some sort of punk-rock thing...I didn't think you'd still be doing it now. But all that...witchcraft stuff, spells and talking to spirits, it's...it..." She looked at him with pity. "It might be the first signs of an impending deeper psychological problem. Like a paranoid-schitzo disorder."

A sardonic smile crept over Malcolm's lips, his eyes hard and wide as if he'd just been hit but had a delayed reaction in actually feeling it.

"Such *big words*. 'Paranoid-schitzo disorder.' Is that even a real term?" He poured about half of his tumbler of beer down his throat and continued. "Where are you hearing this stuff, Deb? Because you sure as shit weren't talking like this before. Talking like this--it's an anomaly. You used to be happy. Now all of the sudden you're questioning my sanity, making psychological diagnoses. What happened? Who talked to you? Because I know *this* much--I know somebody's been talking to you. And it's either some nosy girlfriend or it's a guy you met. So which is it?"

An elderly waiter in a black suit shuffled to their table with two steaming bowls of wonton soup and placed them on the table. Then he slowly shuffled back.

"Malcolm...this is my own mind, my own opinions..." The Asian woman squirmed in her seat, fretting the ends of her sleeves and pulling on them. "...but I

wanted to let you know...I respect you enough to let you know, face-to-face, that there *is* a man I have met and that I like..." She bit her thumbnail and winced.

"Sssorry...I didn't plan for it...and I just want you to know...that I still *like* you...and that we've had so many good times...and that I hope...we can still be friends."

Malcolm, emotionless, a spoon in his hand, asked,

"Well, have you fucked him already?"

Debbie winced again as if she stepped on the leg of a small dog and nodded.

"Then the answer is *no*. So go grab your coat and just get fuck out of here. I'll pay for this."

*** *** ***

Gabriel wasn't prone to overanalyzing things. It was not that he didn't feel, or have opinions. He certainly did have opinions, but rather than dwell on them or waste a good dusk in their contemplation, he would instead simply voice his thoughts contemporaneously to another, if the occasion did arise. The little vampire was, by his own admission, a being of the Now.

But in the dim, flickering light of the freight elevator up to the loft he shared with his sister--so small in the big, rattling metal box--the events of earlier that evening replayed in his mind, as if trying at the same time to capture those moments when he was close to Mia and destroy or at least keep at bay the image of the Hunter's eyes.

Mia--she was acting weird. Why was she acting weird? He hadn't seen her in a while. He thought she'd be happy. The time away from her--he did process it as time away, but time didn't have the same meaning it had for his own kind as it did for humans. It was only like--like weeks had passed, it felt like, only weeks and then they'd be together again. Of course he allowed her to drink from his heart, and the act thus committed a *bond* was struck, a bond far more meaningful than the vulgarity of a mere turning.

He always had a continuity about his Second Life, a regularity, a regularity outside of time, and meeting Mia was a welcome blip on that line of regularity, it

was a blip and then his life settled in an even more satisfying regularity, a deeper and seemingly more permanent regularity outside of time.

(The huge metal car shuddered, then stopped, its gated door slamming open with a bang.)

And then Mia was acting weird.

He knocked on the tall plain white door. Ivan opened it, dressed in an orange terry-cloth bathrobe big enough to accommodate his bodybuilder's frame.

"Hey, dude," he said in an easy Californian drawl. " How's it hangin'"

Gabriel ignored him and walked into the livingroom, where his sister was sitting cross-legged on the black sectional in a white satin halter top and boxers, the long white fingers of her small cold hands dancing over the keys of a laptop. Above her hung, neatly in a row, the three dusky-hued African masks, and their orbless sightless eyes and the toothless slots of their mouths suddenly struck the little vampire as being quite obscene, and in stark contrast to the rest of the monochromatic, sparsely furnished room, even in comparison to the few other overpriced ethnic trifles.

"*Gaby*," Pris said in greeting--excited about some new wicked secret, no doubt--keeping her eyes focused on the subtle glow of the computer screen.

Gabriel walked up to what looked at first to be a series of black lacquered wooden panels in squares and rectangles mounted on the wall like art. He pressed in a long, narrow rectangle and it popped open and to the side on a hinge, revealing a CD rack. Pris always insisted on keeping the media hidden, all the disparate elements of color, the chaos of one's belongings, hidden behind panels.

"Don't forget to put them back this time," his sister warned, already anticipating the boy's plunder of her music collection.

"Yeah,"

"You'd be very proud of your sister, Gabriel...your sister's going to be president of her very own company."

(Let's see: The Pixies, King Crimson, Sleater-Kinney...)

"Really," he replied blandly. "You're president now?"

“Well--not yet. Very soon. Two weeks, the latest.”

(Belle and Sebastian, The White Stripes, Hole...)

“You’re optimistic.”

“Optimism has nothing to do with it. It’s all planned out.”

(Meat Beat Manifesto, Morphine, Propellerheads...ah, here we go: Jay Black and the Americans)

“Nice to have a plan, I guess.”

“What do you think of my speech so far: ‘For 30 years, our beloved Herbert “Baby” Bersee has been synonymous with innovation and high-concepts in modern cosmetology...’”

Gabriel started walking out of the room as if he didn’t hear her, several CD cases in his hands.

“Pris, I’m kind of *--tired* right now. I’m just giving to listen to these and call it a day.”

The petite black-haired vampire cocked an eyebrow and was suddenly at his side, her fingers fretting with his hair as they had been doing with the keyboard only seconds ago.

“Such an *early* night,” she clucked. “I thought you were eschewing Generra policy on night-for-sleep so you could go *catting* around. What’s the matter--*bad date*?”

The boy irritatedly maneuvered his way out of her feline grasp.

“No--not that it’s any of *your business*.” Then, looking straight at her, “Did you know that *Father* is back?”

“...Yes,” she said carefully, immediately dropping her hands and ceasing her attempts to torture her brother.

“Has he been stalking you, have you seen him? He was stalking me, outside the museum.”

“Hahaha...there’s nothing to worry about, Gaby,” his sister answered, turning her back to him and heading for the sectional before an expression could be discerned on her face. “He’s not going to do anything to us. If he was, he would have done so already--*years* ago.” She resumed her place before the

laptop and began typing again. "The fool just wouldn't have it in him. We are his *children*, after all."

Gabriel's face turned ancient.

"He probably *hates* us."

"I don't think you give our dear old *pa-pa* enough credit--he is a *Christian*, after all. Hate the sin, love the sinner and all that."

"But whatever happened to 'thou shalt not kill' and 'vengeance is mine saith the Lord?'"

"Well...Daddy is also a bit of a looney. The man can't help it."

"I just think it's all the more reason to...*get rid of him. Soon*. It's too *dangerous*, having him this close....I...I just have a bad feeling about it."

"Oh, *Gaby*...no reason to resort to such extreme measures with *pa-pa*."

Her face suddenly turned sinister. "Of course...we could always *turn* him, you know...we could all be one big happy..."

"*No!*" Gabriel spit out ferociously, exiting the room in disgust and slamming a door somewhere further in the loft.

Pris giggled to herself evilly as she continued writing her paean to the man who she just ousted from his own company. She knew exactly how to press her brother's many various and sundry buttons, the Oedipal little fuck.

*** *** ***

Malcolm decided to walk back to his store, needing the physical outlet for the crush of manic, angry energy that was steadily pushing against his skin and eyeballs. He wasn't wearing the shoes for such a trek, and he was sure he was going to ruin them, but it was the *least* of his concerns, and he did not anticipate dressing up in such a formal manner for a good long time. He was tired of *trying*--trying to please idiots. And yes, Debbie Tran, as pretty and swanlike as she was, as good as she smelled, as magnificent as she was in the sack, as many boxes of soap she sold as a junior exec at her advertising agency--the girl was an idiot.

I mean--she invited him out to dinner at his favorite restaurant so she

could tell him that she was screwing another guy--who the fuck does that?! What, did she see it on an episode of *Sex In the City*? Is that what *Carrie* does to the losers who just don't have a "Plan" in their lives? Was Debbie's mind so devoid of will or standards or a single solitary freakin' fixed opinion of her own that she could turn on a dime regarding every goddamn thing he was about?!

And how many times did he force himself to sit through that motherfucking interminable HBO craptastic just to make her happy, just to demonstrate how he was a partner in all this, a team-player? When he could have been watching Chris Issak???

No--no more investments in the land of idiots.

Malcolm stopped and waited for the light to change, pulling the brim of his fedora a little lower on his forehead, shielding his eyes as he stared out into the cold and wind. Two uneaten portions of beef and broccoli rested in the pink plastic bag that hung from his fingertips; he took them with him even though he knew he'd never bring himself to eat them, took them just to feel like he *had* something, some return on his investment. Tiny white Christmas lights were already strung over the pathetic potted tress in the shopping district, and they annoyed the shit out of the man, not simply because November had barely started, or that he was a sworn enemy of the Nazarene, but because they were placed there under false pretenses, placed there as if anybody in the position to do so actually cared about cheer or Christ or urban beautification. If he could modify the Crowley quote a hair--do what thou wilt, but do what thou *mean*. But Satan was the Prince of Lies after all, and he supposed that instead of complaining he should be reveling in the hypocrisy, revel in the joke Debbie played on him, revel in every note of discord. And perhaps lying and faked intentions and deception--perhaps that all held a greater truth, the truth of Reality, the truth of What Things Are.

And the meat of what she said back at Happy Chow's regarding his business was true, to an extent. He was only breaking even, and the only reason he could still afford the rent was because the store was in a shit location--and in 3, 5 years a gentrification project like the one that just sunk its claws into St.

Marks could take care of that, send it sky high. And where would he go then?
Bayonne??

Malcolm always thought that the worship of the Dark Father would protect him somehow, like Lucifer shared his distaste for this artificial, spiritless, utterly contrived world, this world that looked oh-so hip, oh-so charitable and socially conscious, but was at its center as conservative and greedy as shit. But maybe--

--maybe this was Satan's realm. Those fucking 10-story Old Navy posters depicting smarmy twentysomethings in stupid utility vests. The damn Christmas lights on pygmy trees that looked as if they had enough problems simply surviving in their 3 x 3 concrete cubes of dirt. *Sex in the City*--definitely, a work of Beelzebub, or at the very least Baal. And of course there was dumping lovers where they felt safe.

He had a vision of the world--and he thought it was a beautiful, worthwhile vision. He liked the old, the whimsical, the baroque--the carnivals, the card tricks, balloon rides, old gangster hangouts, tin toys. He craved mysteries, *wonders*, a higher meaning to life. And so he rebelled. And so he became an eccentric. And he thought that she truly saw that, what he was, and accepted it. And he thought, during those happy, comfortable, dependable days: you really *can* have it all, the way you wanted it, the way you fought so hard and stubbornly stuck to your guns in the face of all opposition to get it.

He was now in the 20s and already starting to get tired. His feet hurt. He walked a bit slower around the vicinity of a couple of subway entrances, debating whether he should just hop on now and pay the fare for the one or two stops he'd have to go or just bear down and complete the journey on foot, as he originally intended. He idly slipped his hand into the pocket of his coat, checking to see if he had an old Metrocard still in there. What he felt instead was metallic, smooth, and cool to the touch--and though the foreign object wasn't slimy or creepy or crawly he jerked his hand out of there quickly with a shudder.

What the hell was that? My keys? No, my keys are in my pants pocket--what--

He cautiously reached back into his pocket and pulled out a pair of round,

wire-rimmed glasses. Granny glasses, like John Lennon used to wear. Did someone slip these into his coat? What the hell?

Malcolm held the folded glasses up to his face and squinted, trying to examine them as best he could under the scattered lights of the City at night. Then he whipped them open with a flick of his wrist and attempted to try them on halfway, just to see the strength of the prescription--

A shot of vertigo brought him to his knees, forcing him to drop the bag and knocking the fedora right off his head. The glasses--it was as if they had pushed their way onto his face and held tight of their own volition, plunging him into a world that looked very much like the one he was just at--only this world was...*compromised*...its structural integrity damaged, unstable, falling apart at the seams. He let out a roar of confusion and shock as he looked up to find the top of the Chrysler Building collapsing upon itself, all the skyscrapers folding up, telescoping down into themselves, and the sky, the sky with these...*holes*...poked into it, holes poked in as one would do to a piece of paper with a sharpened pencil...and in the holes, in place of the dark blue night sky...was *nothing*. Nothing, not even blackness, just nothing.

Malcolm wrapped his arms around his abdomen in pain, sweat shooting down his face from the top of his head. He tried to close his watery blue eyes, tried to block it all out, but it was as if he had no eyelids, and tears born not of sorrow but sheer physical and existential distress dripped from them in fits and starts. It felt like *forever*--and it felt like the Last Book, no doubt, the last chapter of the last story, and he just couldn't believe or accept that the last major act of his life would be being dumped at Happy Chow's by Debbie Tran...that he wouldn't get some sort of reprieve, some sort of satisfaction, some sort of closure. And he felt like such a complete failure, even though he knew it was the End and such designations were meaningless--

And what of everybody else--??

He listened for their screams, but it was as if his eardrums were busted. And he looked for the people, but there was such a whirlwind, a whirlwind of detritus, of paper and metal and garbage and glass, and before him opened a

fissure in the ground, a soundless, terrible ripping of the concrete and asphalt, and as it grew it swallowed up everything in its path--light poles, mailboxes, cars--and he tried to move, to get out of the way, but he was frozen, his torso close to the ground and resting atop his kneeling legs and his chin almost touching his knees...but the lip, the lip of the hole before him was but a starting point, and it radiated away from him, and over the lip he could hear the songs of Those who lay in wait far below the strata, *dreaming*, and they sang in both melodious, human chorals and in tongues guttural, savage, and utterly alien, and though the songs were differently rendered they were the same, and Malcolm heard them in a third, *truer* language directly within his skull, and the song, he recognized it as being---directly--addressed--to--him--

“Luh-Lucifer?!” the slight blond man called out weakly to the lip of the hole that rested on the horizon of his vision...and the song played on, in its three interpretations, and Malcolm dragged himself over to the edge of the fissure, a giant slab of concrete laced with steel flying over his back and casting a huge, frightening shadow over his nearly prone body, and the song--it wanted him to stay--it wanted him to stay--but he *couldn’t*--because he was *so afraid*--because everything he was, everything he *knew*, even those things he hated, it was all falling apart--

He cried uncontrollably, shaking his head, hoping they would understand--
“I can’t...I can’t stay...I’m sorry...I just...”

And they sang to him, and they planted in his mind a vision of a beautiful banquet, up on ivory stairs, just like Mt. Olympus...and they were all so beautiful...and the story...of the *Child*...

And the voice of the narrator, so objective and clear and reassuring, he said,

“The Child was invited to the banquet, but had to travel first through the Mansion, and along the way they covered the Child’s eyes so the Child wouldn’t have to see the scattered incidences of the Horror that resided there. And when the Child finally reached the Great Hall, where the banquet was being held, everyone was waiting for the Child, both Them, at the front, on the dais, and the

crowd below, at their tables, supping on their meal, drinking their wine.

“And the Prince, He took up the child lovingly in his arms and pointed to the crowd and tried to make the Child understand, but the Child was simply too much in awe, and to young for such understanding. And the Prince addressed the crowd, and they suddenly fell silent, rapt in expectation at any word or syllable He might utter, and the Prince told them that the Child had finally arrived at the banquet, and now that the Child had arrived, He didn’t need them anymore. And with a snap of His finger, the crowd--simple folk: humans just like you--received the Terrible Affliction. And some of Them had sought to again cover the Child’s eyes that the Child might be spared the images of the Horror. But the Terrible Affliction was of such a breadth and scope of severity that it was unable to be ignored.

“Malcolm--you could be on the dais, with us, but you must choose wisely. For this world, it is ending, it is crumbling to atoms, and everything you are, in a blink of an eye, rendered irrelevant. It is the dawning of the Child’s age, but the specifics are as of yet unwritten...*join* us, stay here with us, and live out your life eternal out in the open, in your world, in an improved world, where we can all start over together and things can be the way they were always meant to be.

“You were preparing your whole life for this, Malcolm--you can rest assured it was not all in vain.”

And now it was as if there was nothing left but the little patch of earth upon which he crouched and the fissure open before him...but the fissure had taken over, and was everywhere, and was the world, and he had no place to go, no exit and he didn’t think he could take much more.

Then he felt something inside of him, something rogue, like an infection, take over his body, from the base of the spine, and it was a Something either unbelievably strong and wise or unbelievably stupid and foolhardy and suicidal, and he didn’t want to get too close to it--as it made him rather discomfited--but put up no resistance as it thrust through the muscle and bone of his arms and animated his hands to grab the spectacles and tear them off--

And it all stopped.

And it was as if nothing had happened; not even the tears remained on his cheeks. And beside him on the sidewalk were the remains of the beef and broccoli, which had burst out of their white cardboard containers on impact with the ground.

He pulled himself back up on his feet and regarded the glasses with horror, looked at them closely, trying to divine its infernal secrets, but lost his grip on the metal, the glasses folding up on their own and slipping away from his fingers, squirming away from his fingers and flapping like a fish, and soon it was not there anymore, and he was grasping at air.

But were the glasses ever there?

And was it a magick of some sort? A glamour?

Or--

Was he merely--

Debbie's words dogged him as he descended the stairs to the subway, and he felt overwhelmed, as if all those structures he built for himself over the many years were collapsing like those imaginary skyscrapers.

*** * * * *

The Dermaco cafeteria was overflowing with the employees--*all* the employees--who were summoned a little after 11:00 to witness the changing of the guard. And in the epicenter of the crowd was Pris Baxter, the speech she had started working on two weeks before--before the event precipitating it ever occurred--in her small white hand. Standing next to her was "Baby" Bersee, his right leg in a metal brace that was attached to his flesh by dozens of needle-like metal rods. Apparently he had been enjoying a Sunday afternoon Bloody Mary out on in the garden when out of nowhere this small meteor falls out of the sky, knocks a plaster cherub from its precipice two floors above, and, in Rube Goldberg fashion, landed and loosened a piece of masonry on the first floor which came crashing down on his leg, shattering it in a zillion pieces. Bersee, who was engaged in a (very) casual conversation with himself regarding the

literal conversion of the communion host and wine into actual flesh and blood (as seen in a vision by Danny Thomas), took the accident as a sign from God and became on the spot a born-again Christian. After much discussion with the dove-headed Holy Spirit, which now resided in Bersee's cranium, he decided to walk away from Dermaco and travel the world witnessing for Christ. And, as a constant reminded of his religious experience, he wore a fragment of the blackish-green meteor around his neck in a specially-treated glass vial, the rest of it having been carted off by the CIA and is now being kept in an orange airtight drum on Area 51.

After the words were recited, the details of Bersee's conversion recounted, and the keys to the kingdom passed along official, Pris gave "Baby" a big hug, everybody oohed and aahed, and the petite vampire/CEO of Dermaco announced the date of the annual Thanksgiving Gala that would conveniently have the dual function of both celebrating the quaint American holiday and the launch of the "New Era."

As the crowd dispersed and headed back to their individual cubby-holes, Pris whispered to Tara,

"Obviously I'm going to be holed up in meetings for the rest of the day, but I just wanted to say, 'brava! *Great work!* And a *meteor*, of all things! How on Earth did you ever think of a such a thing?"

"Just frightfully original and clever, I guess," Tara said, shrugging her padded shoulders. "But how do you think Bersee is going to handle the 'God hates fags' aspect of the whole fundamentalist racket? Is he going to stop being gay?"

"I doubt it," the vampire answered as they reached the corridor where their rooms were located. "I think his God has a don't ask, don't tell policy."

And with that, Tara entered her office, locked the door, stuck the little white bud headphones of the iPod Pris bought her for her birthday (with the words "Sleep hath its own world/And a wide realm of wild reality." engraved on its back), and played "I just Want To Be Your Everything" full blast.

At some point during her reverie she spied from out of the corner of her

eye a large dark form standing by the file cabinets, and blanched when she recognized that it was Roy.

The witch had expected another portentous list of warnings, demands, and general enigmatic nonsense, but instead the tall brown man in the hat and the long black trenchcoat just *stood* there, staring at her--staring at her with his eyes, his real, naked eyes instead of those wraparound mirrored glasses he usually wore, and she wished he'd put them back on, because he was staring at her, staring with an unimaginably grim countenance, a stare so deep and all-encompassing, a stare like God--if there was such a thing--would stare, a stare multiplied and infinite, a stare with eyes so wide and dilated and focused it almost made him look like a Matt Groening character.

The iPod almost dropped out of her hand as she jerkily turned the volume down and confronted--

“What?”

He kept staring. Outside the office she could hear the muffled cluck and hubbub of workers still reeling and excited over this morning's drama.

And he kept staring, staring without the relief of so much as a blink.

“WHAT??!” the witch yelled, jumping in place once for emphasis.

But of course he never explained himself--they never do--and his image just stopped being visible and popped out of the world like a hallucination come to its sudden end. And somewhere else in the City, in an abandoned building two blocks away from the Sausage Factory, in the trickle of light from the relentless mid-day sun that streamed in through razor-thin cracks between nailed boards, Joshua Brundage--known as the Hunter to all including his own family--staked and decapitated twelve Caress members as they lay under piles of old blankets and newspapers. Upon hearing of the incident Rache herself pulled on an oddly-conservative heavy navy pea coat and insisted on being taken to the scene of the carnage. And upon viewing the twelve heads neatly amassed in a pile in the center of the room like volleyballs in gym storage--twelve bodies twisted in the throes of dying still lying where they had been hibernating, partially covered by their bedding--Rache determined that it must have been one of Generra's “death

squads" who did the deed, carrying out once again Pris Baxter's call for the elimination of "undesirable" vampires. Baxter's stormtroopers had formerly limited their liquidations to the usual suspects of the undead world: lone wolves, freaks, crazies, ancients. But now, with the slaughter of regular Caress members, faces familiar and soldiers loyal--

It was the day that Rache Merrywether decided that Generra absolutely had to be destroyed. And as much as the core of her fiery nature screamed loudly for vengeance--vengeance immediate and bloody--the part of her that was a clan leader, the part that had been steadily developing over the last few years to the point where she could stand amidst the crumpled and dismembered remains of *kin* and *childe* and not make a scene, not break the few pieces of furniture in the space with her bare hands and scream into the air at Pris's invisible effigy, knew that patience and careful planning was key. Satisfaction might come later than she desired it to--but it would come and it would be of the most delicious flavor imaginable. Satisfaction--it would taste so good that it just might have made all...*this...*worth it.

"I need a priest," she said between her clenched teeth to the small band of Caress that stood around her, awaiting her instructions with glassy-eyed anticipation.

IN THE PALACE

Tara had initially found the idea of taking a charter bus to Long Island with several dozen of her fellow employees to be somewhat off-putting--there was the fact of her general misanthropy, of course, but also that by this time the majority of Dermaco employees--from executives to the dudes in the mailroom--were Undead. The witch didn't exactly look forward to close to two hours of being enclosed in a narrow steel box with 30 or 40 vamps--though it certainly sounded rather kinky on paper. But there was yet another reason for her reluctance, one that vexed her to no end just to consciously recognize. Pris, her date (her date!), and several high-ranking Dermacoers were all travelling to the party in a limousine. And *she* was not invited.

The full implications of just what a massive rock 'em sock 'em robots slap in the face move it was to cut her out of the limo only hit her on the afternoon before the Gala, when she was already bathed-up and her legs and pits were shaved and her stockings on and a schmear of Tobacco Flower perfume from the Body Shop applied to her neck, chest, and wrists. She was still living in the hotel room, a space which she grudgingly felt comfort with despite the must, bad art, and profound Nabokovian existential aura that pervaded its orange-and-brown interior. A couple of times she had placed calls to Corcoran in the hopes of buying a co-op in some tawny boho enclave--but at the last minute she always cancelled the viewings. The witch didn't know why she was holding back on the investment or on the lavishing of herself using the steadily-growing nest-egg she had stewing in the bank--perhaps it was simply laziness. Working at Dermaco--or rather, "working" at Dermaco--left her a spirit devoid of motivation; and, if she didn't know any better, she'd think she was even depressed. Which was crazy.

"Tara," sounded the crackling reception from Pris's cell. "What do you mean you're not going to the Gala? Stop being silly."

"I'm not being silly, Sis," Tara replied, "Sis" being the relatively recent pet name the vampire encouraged her to use, and which she used in turn, because

things were all kind of fucked up. The witch was perched on the edge of her bed, phone wedged between her shoulder and ear, arms folded across her chest, and “Robin and the 7 Hoods” playing soundless on the microwave-sized television set. “I’m just not feeling well today, is all. I’m *sure* you’ll manage the party *without* me...”

“What’s the matter with you? Just throw on a frock and get over there and have a good time. If it wasn’t for you, none of this would even be happening, anyhow.”

Tara had desired to parse her words wisely, to not let on to Pris about the annoyance and, yes, even hurt she felt at the snub...because displaying real emotion, especially over what hurts you--it was just distasteful and foolish in the hipper circles. But the brunette, as hard as she tried, simply could not stop being a Fool.

“THEN WHY WASN’T I INVITED ON THE FURSHLUNGER LIMOSINE?!”

And the vampire, predictably savoring this little taste of the witch’s vulnerability, feeling flattered and a wee bit sadistic, carefully explained that it wasn’t part of official company protocol for assistants to do things like accompany higher-ups in the limo, because they would be talking about “higher-ups” stuff, and besides even if she *could* get Tara in it would attract too much suspicion. Of course, the vampire added, she knew who the *real* mover and shaker was at Dermaco--and if the President knows, it’s like the Secret Cardinal the Pope elects, it’s still an honor, and perhaps the greatest honor of all--because it was all so *selfless*.

“And don’t forget to wear your *bling*, dear--no need to worry about anyone thinking it’s weird, or anything. We’re *Family* at Dermaco, now.”

So Tara, who proceeded to put on a slinky black spaghetti-strap dress, fretting about the slight bulge in her middle as the result of all those vending machine runs (though with the increasingly vampiric concentration of workers on her floor those trays of home baked graham-cracker bars and mysterious platters of Krispy Kreme had noticeably dwindled). She resolved to suck in her gut for the rest of the evening, as well as her pride. “We’re Family at Dermaco now,” Pris

said--if that was truly the case, and the employees so open that the brazen wearing of an ancient Pagan symbol of witchcraft would give her no censure...then why couldn't she ride in the limo? All things in life and business, it seemed to the witch, stemmed from who was invited to ride in the limo. It was obvious Pris wanted no one to know--including and probably *especially* her fellow vampires--that she was drawing all this sudden corporate success and power from a means outside of herself. She wanted it *all*--all the glory, just like she wanted her photos instead of Bersee's in Cosmetics Weekly. And it bothered Tara, it really did--but she looked past it, threw on a zebra-print coat, and headed out the door. There would be *alcohol* at the party, after all.

*** *** ***

The vampires that accompanied Tara in the bus were surprisingly polite and a barrel of laughs to be with, despite occasional drools over the bump of her carotid artery. They--men and women both, dressed to the nines but not to the off-putting point where they looked perfect--were the sorts of people one would chat with over Guinness at the local pub, or who would be on one's bowling team (not that the witch ever engaged in either activity, as she preferred to drink alone and absolutely *loathed* sports). There was Agnes from Accounting, a short, delicate-boned Filipina with long healthy black hair, a gold anklet of a star hanging over her left foot, and no more use for her midday vomit-breaks in the ladies room now that she was on her Second Life (which was fortunate, because the bulimia was beginning to be quite the health problem for her). And seated two rows away from Agnes, kneeling on his seat to talk with those behind him on the bus just like a little kid, was James, that rotund cut-up from R&D. James always wore these funny ties with his suits, with pictures of Bugs Bunny, Spiderman, or the Three Stooges silkscreened on them, and helpfully taped off the TV all the most popular shows so he could lend them the next day to co-workers who might have missed them. James had a lovely wife and new daughter that he used to bring over the offices all the time but never did any more...in fact, strangely, he

never even mentioned them anymore.

And so hanging out with the Undead (and, by association, her fellow employees) was nowhere near the unpleasant experience she thought it would be--in fact, for the first time since her meetings with the ill-fated Invisible College at the pastry shop, Tara felt a sense of community, and the fact that *she* was a practitioner of the infernal arts and *they* were blood-drinkers provided them with a sort of common ground, where nobody looked down on the other. To make the trip go by even faster they started playing word games, then broke out in impromptu karaoke, where the witch belted out a particularly rousing rendition of "Brandy." In fact, the only discordant note to the whole journey, besides the faint odor of dead person's clothes, was when Zahire from Graphic Design had to be pulled off of Rodrigo from Manufacturing--but the young man, in a double blessing, was both turned instead of killed and was angling to be promoted to the Second Life anyway, believing the Gift to give him that extra edge he needed to compete in today's workplace.

The bus pulled up in front of Casa De Clair De Lune, a three-story glass "palace" situated next to the ocean--the location of which probably accounting for the gaudy "shells and seahorses" theme of the establishment. It looked like a pearl-strewn bordello from the Little Mermaid universe, with floors made of a shimmering mother-of-pearl finish and all the walls made of mirrors. Silver-suited men in hard, swirling hair that looked like plastic greeted each guest at the door, took their coat, and snapped a picture from a Polaroid camera around their neck. Tara made an embarrassed, half-hearted pose before the flash, hating as always to commit her image to any one place, to be frozen, in time immemorial, incriminated and on the spot with no room to glamour or wriggle out of; but she figured this photo would probably turn out as all the photos of her, even the Dermaco ID card she kept in her bra, did--with a blurry head.

To get to the Gala proper she had to pass by series of smaller spaces, one of which was a long mirrored hall draped in translucent fabric which had set up against a wall a full bar and a small table boasting *hors d'oevres* resting on doilies. She quickly shoved some small cracker-like things with a fish-like paste

smeared on them in her mouth and ordered a glass of red wine. Polishing off the first attack right in front of the expressionless female bartender in the silver men's suit, she immediately asked for another. Then she weaved her way to the main ballroom, keeping an eye out always for Pris, the only person she would ever wear heels for, and the only satisfying female fuck she ever had.

Upon viewing the decor of the main hall, bedecked in the very un-Thanksgiving-like colors of white, silver, and satin-pink, the witch's first thought was of that line from Grease: "Let's hear it for the toilet paper!" It looked, frankly, like a high-school prom, with actual tinfoil stars hanging from the ceiling as well as several mid-sized disco balls. Posted on one wall was a large sign, embellished with small white-and-pink balloons that resembled inflated condoms, which read:

**DERMACO: THE NEXT GENERATION OF SKINCARE! HAPPY
THANKSGIVING!**

*Were the celluloid "Baby" dolls with the crazed heads even packed in Bersee's old office yet, Tara wondered, not in outrage or pity but out of an inborn fascination with the obscene and nervy. Pris certainly cut the head off of that snake, she mused--only, it wasn't even a snake, it was just a ridiculous old man who got better dick on any given Tuesday night than the witch would get in a lifetime. But to her boss--the new President of Dermaco--they were *all* snakes, all obstacles, and she surmounted them, she was the last one standing, and the world was resting in her small cold hand. Brava, Pris.*

And this entire ballroom--it was filled mostly with vampires. Tara stole a glance at a Claire de Lune worker in the obsequious silver suit who was tending to a sterno under a buffet tray of pasta--would the humans be safe here? Oh c'mon, they'd have to be--the witch couldn't picture the jovial set she rode out there with actually picking off the hired help. They were *Generra*, after all--and to commit atrocities at such a high-profile event...No, Pris would have their heads on a platter if anyone so much as tried to nibble on a waiter. And it wasn't as if they were going to actually drink and lose their self-control in intoxication--though many had glasses and plastic cups in their hands, not a drop passed to their lips.

Yes, they were the Undead--but perhaps nothing more extreme than an offshoot of humanity, like the Uncanny X-Men, a bunch of people with simply a medical peculiarity.

“Living on a Prayer” began to spin from the DJ’s fingers. Dermaco employees, sharp in tuxes and evening dresses, started to pair off and drift to the luminescent dance-floor. The lights suddenly dimmed and a strobe light began to whirl as the opening of the song thundered through loud, mega-watt speakers. And the witch stood awkward, alone, confused, slightly tipsy, constantly being inadvertently shoved by partygoers heading for the dancefloor--she stood, keeping her eyes peeled for Pris, tapping her foot as the sole concession to the pulsing energy of celebration that exploded all around her in an orgy of happiness...and it dawned on her...she was back in fucking junior high!

That song--it was the emblem of everything that was wrong with her life in the late 80s, it had memories encoded within it, within every guitar lick and lyric sung. Bon Jovi was not the music of misfits and losers--they were instead the pomp and circumstance of middle-class cool, the types that were not only the golden boys and girls of their communities but also wielded terrific right hooks and be as sadistic as motherfuckers. In contrast, the witch remembered with great fondness the coming of Guns N Roses and the nihilism they brought with them...the painting by Robert Williams in the cassette art, the skulls of the band-members on the cover...they provided her with her first tastes of something even moderately resembling, if not exactly a gothic sensibility, something infused with the Thanotic impulse. And Faith No More’s “Epic”--the first time she heard it she knew it was the song of her life...

And what were the chances of hearing Faith No More at Casa De Claire De Lune’s Dermaco Thanksgiving Gala...hmm???

And what was Pris thankful for this year--was it Tara? Or was that, along with Bersee’s departure, a done deal?

The witch headed back to the bar in the hall. There was actually a line of these vampire hypocrites, all waiting for the skillfully prepared screwdrivers and martinis their dead-but-animated bodies could not process.

She felt a hand on her back, by her bra strap, and it was warm.
“Mandy!”

*** *** ***

Glenn Mandible, it had to be admitted, looked awful well in a tuxedo. The two had stepped away from the crush of the dance and the glare of the migraine-inducing strobe and travelled up a flight of transparent, glowing stairs to a smaller, quieter branch of the party. In the spottily-occupied blue-and-silver room they would at least be able to hear themselves talk--though just the fact of Glenn wanting to talk seemed rather odd to Tara. She was sure a gregarious busybody like Glenn “bra-strap” Mandible would be out mashing on some chick out on the dance-floor. Then she remembered...

“Everybody just seems kind of...*weird* lately,” Glenn opined, taking a sip from his Peach Schnapps.

“Oh, I don’t know...they seem pretty ok to me,” the witch replied, uneasily using her peripheral vision to scope out any vamps that could be listening.

“Oh come on--you mean you haven’t *noticed*? How different everybody has been acting? Even on the bus over here...nobody would hardly even make light conversation with me...well, except for Roz from Accounts Payable, she kept trying to lick my neck.” Glenn broke his usual affected, car-salesman demeanor and looked desperately at Tara, his brow furrowed in anxiety. “Do you think...do you think they heard from somewhere that I’m going to get *sacked*, or something? Have *you* heard anything--I mean, you’re assistant to the President now and all.” The strains of an indistinct Backstreet Boys song could be heard from downstairs, making the floor vibrate.

“Uhm...no, not really...maybe you’re just over-reacting, being paranoid.--“

“Oh *man*,” the attractive dark-haired man intoned, “I just hope it’s not because I’m going to get fired...you know how it is here, once you’re marked for termination everybody knows it, they can just smell it, and then they just don’t want anything to do with you, before it even happens, as if they might get

contaminated by your *loserdom...*" He finished off his Schnapps and looked directly into Tara's brown eyes. "Did anyone ever tell you that you look just like Sean Young?"

The witch blinked.

"Why, because I'm crazy?"

Glenn pointed his finger at her and smiled, the smarm returning.

"I'll *bet* you are...crazy *like a fox!*" He motioned to her chest. "By the way—*like* the peace sign!"

"The what?"

"The peace sign you have on your necklace. *Tres hip!*"

"Uh..."

It was then that Tara caught a glimpse of Pris and her entourage pass, like a mass procession of ghosts, by a doorway at the other end of the room. The witch leapt to her feet, the sight of the petite vampire activating something in her wine-addled brain, driving her towards the woman.

"Uh, ah, Glenn, I gotta go, I see Pris--my *boss*--and I have to tell her something..."

She left before he could even reply, cutting through the sparse crowd of revelers and making a B-line for the open doorway. Soon she was out on a large patio that wrapped around the perimeter of the second floor. Salty cool air hit her face and she felt her nipples harden under the thin rayon of her dress at the sudden drop in temperature. The sun was making its way under the Earth and the sky was banded in a gradation of colors--red, pink, purple, and dark blue. Almost 30 feet away she spotted Pris and the others laughing and making conversation, ensconced in a corner with the female vampire in the middle, in the spotlight, looking radiant in a red silk dress cut in the style of the 1920s, a long waist, a fringed hem beaded in crystals, and a lovely long string of pearls draped around her elegant white neck. A very big, muscular man with a lustrous brown mane of Samson-like hair and a goatee was at her side, his massive hand almost completely around her thin waist and his muzzle rubbing against her ear and cheek wickedly. Balanced on the silver railing next to them was a line of glasses

and plastic cups filled with untouched drinks.

Tara slowly walked up to the little group, through invisible cobwebs of her own inebriation, walking up like she was confident, though her feet wavered on their two-inch heels, walked up and made several attempts to establish eye-contact with Pris along the way, one time almost seemingly to succeed, almost but then she turned away, and in five minutes it was over, with a couple of short, polite sentences from the petite vampire in the red dress, closed out with the advice to "mingle." The witch was quietly caught up in aborted rage; the *nerve* of this woman, to treat her in so curt and patronizing an attitude, as if...as if she was an *assistant*, a freakin' secretary that addresses Christmas Cards and places orders for coffee! And, after hanging on uncomfortably for about 30 seconds after what was apparently her "boss's" last words to her for the evening before they went their separate ways in the bus and limo, as the vampire sensuously greeted the pawing and sniffs of her brawny companion with contented moans that sounded like a cat in estrus, Tara grabbed a couple of the drinks that were on the railing, walked in the opposite direction to an uninhabited area of the patio on the far side of Casa De Clair De Lune, and nestled herself beside a tall stack of white plastic chairs, her ass cold on the tiled floor, her knees up to her chin, and the sun just about drowned. And she brought to her mouth something that tasted a lot like whiskey, and she tipped that fucker down her throat even though she knew it would burn, and she savored the heat in brought and then she stared at a certain glowing spot just over the horizon, and fell once again under the crushing, seductive weight of virulent memory.

*** *** ***

Tara had shown up at the Kennedy College Student Union Halloween Party dressed as the Sweet Hereafter--an odd choice for a woman, but within the spectrum of occult activities she was engaged in with her best friend, Molly Griep, it was rather unremarkable and everyday. For the two girls had recently embarked on a comic book venture, "Fools and Vampires," and Molly had really

big plans for it, plans far beyond any dreams they might have harbored about fame or money, or sweet licensing deals. They had reached a spiritual level of awareness that surpassed such materialistic trifles, the shortish blond felt, and had to keep their eyes affixed on a *Higher Purpose*. To that noble end the comic book was utilized, incorporating a magickal technique that Molly credited herself with pioneering the conscious application of. And of course, there was always the ongoing attempts at creating a *tulpa* of the deceased actor who portrayed the Sweet Hereafter, Rob Sullivan--or if unsuccessful at creating an actual thoughtform, to achieve some sense of *gnosis* with him. Hence Tara's costume.

But it was about more than achieving gnosis...it was something Molly had mentioned, in one of her many lectures to her on magick--the concept of Tempting Fate, taunting fate. And why would the tall, soft-spoken, somewhat gawky young woman wish to taunt fate by wearing that black spandex outfit, shroud-like shredded bits of the material tied off and hanging limply from her arms and legs, white pancake makeup on her face, face like the newly-dead--the very get-up Rob Sullivan was wearing when he was accidentally stabbed in his chest, down to the very truly morbid bloody gash applied between Tara's breasts with a dime-store "Hollywood FX" kit which couldn't even be seen outside the costume but known to just her?

Just tempting fate. Just *because*. Just trying to start trouble. Just as Molly taught her--that the very apex of magickal expression that could be performed on this limited, oft-wretched blue-green marble was to effect changes in its reality.

And wouldn't it be *something*--

Wouldn't it be something if her costume, coupled with her anarchic intentions, *did* trip off something in the Spiritual Realm, did tempt some god or entity or screw up some planned cosmic design or just did something *cool*?

And why do it--

Because.

Because the option was there, and she and Molly Griep had nothing else better to do.

Molly herself, her green Jansport slung across her shoulder and her, was

dressed as some sort of pseudo witch/vampire, with a long red velvet cloak, heavy theatrical-looking makeup--pale skin, ruby red lips outlined in black, kohl-streaked eyes behind her wire-rimmed spectacles--and a leather bustier she purchased at a Goth shop in the City, a bustier in her favorite color, a hue she referred to as “dried blood,” a hue that could be achieved by carefully mixing just a few drops of black on a pool of red--

The unusual duo received cat-calls and shrieks as they traversed the wooded canvas and across the street to the boxy brick Student Union building, and Molly dismissed the hecklers and howlers privately to her pasty-faced friend with a dismissive gesture of her ringed hand,

“They aren’t important. They don’t matter. *You* know that...that they don’t matter.”

The party was being held at the penthouse floor; and on one floor down from there, a parallel affair for the Spanish-speaking students of Kennedy was underway, and the sounds of their salsa and Hot 97 dance remixes mingled strangely with the mix of Top 40, electronica, and smattering of grunge from upstairs. The penthouse space was wide, largely devoid of furniture except for the long table where the food and generic 2-liters of soda-pop were and the small army of folding chairs that were brought out from the commencement day reserves; googly-eyed pumpkin-men and skeletons with crepe-paper arms and legs and classic Beistle cutouts of black cats with arched backs and green, stripe-gartered witches on broomsticks decorated the walls and hung from wire hangers from pipes on the ceiling. And, much to Tara and Molly’s dismay, more than half the revelers decided not to be in costume.

“They shouldn’t even be allowed to *be* here if they’re not going to get dressed,” the blond in the red cloak muttered angrily, her blue eyes swimming in agitation behind her glasses. “Some people, they don’t ever *try*, don’t even make a goddamn *effort*.”

“I know,” Tara whispered, rubbing her arms in discomfort. “it just...makes me feel like I stand out, like I’m a *freak*...”

“Screw that,” Molly said, grabbing her friend’s hand and dragging her

towards the restroom, "let's get wasted."

Liquor had been banned from campus events ever since the unfortunate ice-pick incident of '92, and so the girls, who had both just discovered the pleasures and ritual-enhancing properties of mind-altering substances of several different stripes, would have to depend on the stash of the winecoolers Mol had in the Jansport. They fast-walked past several women who were applying their Halloween makeup in the mirror and locked themselves in the same stall, the toilet between them, trying hard not to giggle in the majesty of their own small subversion. Molly's childhood fascination with clotted blood aside, and whatever the tall brunette might have been in a past life, the two were always rather straight-laced and law-abiding--but the Change had begun to affect them, open them, introduce them to what perhaps was always waiting, waiting to be loosed, waiting to *Be*. Molly's theory (she had many) was that the reason they had both led such sheltered, repressed lives was that they were so intrinsically powerful magick-wise that it was as if...the gods were hiding them, *treasuring* them in their innocence, keeping them *pure*, unwilling to let them spill all that atomic power out until they were of age...and that the wait, though frustrating, though the producer of many an angry, despairing tear in the bowels of high school...was *worth* it.

That was the key to Molly Griep's conception of the universe--that one day, it would all be worth it, that the answer would be revealed, and that then they would *see*--

Molly ripped off a piece of the label and used it to help her twist off the metal cap. Then she shoved the cold lip into Tara's black-painted mouth--

"Whoa, watch it--I'm gonna smear my face."

"You know what the problem is," the blond replied, taking a quick, clipped swig out of the bottle Tara had pushed away and nodding her head in anticipation of her own impending good point, "the problem is, that *They*"--she jerked a thumb at the stall door-- "think that *We*"--she pointed an index finger at herself, "are *freaks*. But *they're* the freaks, really, freaks of nature--*true* nature. True nature--the nature of the world--is *Variety*, is...is *Chaos*. It's all a big building up and sweeping away, and what they"--she jerked her thumb at the door again--

“want to do is just deny the fact of that sweeping away. That sweeping away that is always inevitable and that would trump the building part in the last hour. They want to deny the fact of the Infinite Variety and Difference in nature, this variety that is so much a part of the intrinsic chaos. They all want their perfect, ordered worlds--but it is in denial of the facts of reality, true reality which is Chaos--and this ordered world that we have to slog through, this ordered world that tries so hard to shape us in its flavorless mold, and then break us down when we refuse--it's *Maya*, it's a shill, it, in reality, is not true reality. And that is what We,”-- she tipped the neck of her bottle towards her and Tara-- “have to rectify.”

The taller woman, already getting a buzz and she hadn't even drank yet, looked at her companion in awe. Molly--she was like some sort of...sage. A guru. All these many years of great and inquiring minds, the Enlightenment, Buddha, Albert Einstein, all that--and it was a plucky little German-Irish girl from Canarsie who figured it all out.

“Damn straight,” Tara said, lightly stamping a booted foot for emphasis, unable to find anything else in her limited mind to add to such a perfect encapsulation of the Nature of It All.

“And I had a dream about you last night,”

“Really?” the taller woman replied with bug-eyes. Oh, this was really quite singular. Tara loved it when Molly had dreams about her, because such visions weren't merely the symbolic flotsam of one's subconscious, but, at least in Molly's case (since she was “connected,” if you know what I mean), information direct from the Akashic Records themselves.

“Sure did.” Her blue eyes narrowed, as if she was seeing it all over again, in the air. “It was kind of creepy, actually. In the dream you were...in this awful business suit...and your hair was all cut in this stiff, conservative look, and you were...it was like you were a business person, and though I saw you, you wouldn't listen to me anymore. I tried to meet you, in this 1950s type diner, and tell you that you were going the wrong way--that's exactly what I said in the dream, “going the wrong way”--but you just wouldn't listen to me. And then this crane--like you see in those games, the ones you put a quarter in and you try to

get a toy--just lifted you up out of there through the air, straight up in the air, and then you were gone." And when she said "gone," she made a motion with her free hand, palm out.

Tara was aghast. She hadn't the slightest bit of insight of what the dream meant, but comprehended on some level, based partially on her friend's now-grave expression, that she must have fucked up in it somehow.

"Gosh...I don't know...do you have any idea what it means?"

"Do you?" the blond responded almost accusingly.

"Wha--not me! I'd never work in one of those offices like that...that would *kill* me."

"It was very disturbing, seeing you like that. And you were very distant with me, casting aspersions on my judgment and even *sanity*."

"I'm...I'm sorry," Tara apologized, sincerely, as if it really had happened. "How did I look...did I look happy, or sad, or...or evil, or what?"

"I tried to see your face, directly--but it was all blurry."

And then things grew quiet in the stall, with Molly sullen, and Tara quietly, sheepishly, sticking her hands in the Jansport to flitch a bottle.

Suddenly Molly brightened up and said,

"You know what, let's go back outside..." Tara reluctantly put back the Bartles and Jaymes. "...that cute Goth guy from the library is supposed to be here..."

The Cute Goth Guy From the Library--was *that* why Molly was so hot-up to go to this shindig? Sometimes--when her faith was at its weakest, ebbing moments--Tara entertained the potentially devastating notion that perhaps all of Molly's new interests over the last year--the Wicca, the Gothic Culture, even the Vampires--were all secretly, truly sparked and maintained not because of some deep-seated affinity or realization of a spiritual truth, but because she thought they would bring her closer to the Cute Goth Guy From the Library. That she thought that all those things were somehow, in some way, things that were what that guy was about, things he would like in a woman. But that, of course, was an absolutely daft supposition, because if it was true that meant that everything they

did, everything Molly taught her, everything was just so she could get a fu--

“I don’t think he’s here,” Molly said in concern, squinting behind her glasses and looking out into the crowd. “I don’t think he’s shown up. Have you seen him? Have you seen him?”

Thus disappointed, the girl decided to take her friend’s suggestion and grab a bite to eat--to make something of this journey into the wilds of Student Spirit worthwhile. They sat under a big glowing map of the United States and poked at their soggy macaroni with flimsy sporks, and “Missing You” be Everything But The Girl was playing, and an African-American man in white makeup not unlike Tara’s and a purple cape and hood was dancing with a buxom white chick in a Pilgrim outfit. And beyond them, drifting past the open doorway, on the unlit balcony, was a figure that looked very much like The Sweet Hereafter.

*** *** ***

Though the Sweet Hereafter was initially Molly’s “baby” Tara kept the sighting of the shade greedily to herself--felt an immediate kinship to it, an attraction and instant obsession that she never experienced during all the many *tulpa*-raising sessions with her friend or all the repeat viewings of the movie that she was forced to watch like a cult indoctrination tape. No--there was nothing like witnessing the object of a religious devotion first-hand, it was what drove prophets and poets, drove them onwards and sometimes over the Threshold, and Tara merely excused herself to go get some Orange Shasta and then quickly--very quickly, in what might be termed a prelude to running--headed for the balcony.

She searched in vain under the meager light from inside, peering to the left and right of the long, empty outdoor space. Before her, past the metal mesh railing, she could see the entire campus slumbering under tall, green, art deco lamps, and before it all a massive brick building with white Grecian columns and a large golden clock-face with on the top with Roman numerals. Looking at that

clock, realizing that there were no hands on it, Tara had the sudden, inexplicable impulse to jump off the balcony and commit suicide.

Tara's mindless contemplation of her own destruction was interrupted by an object that fell from the sky and landed with a metallic thud at her feet.

Shaken by the conscious comprehension of the near-miss of both a potential suicide and being struck in the head by the mysterious item, the tall brunette regained her composure and knelt down to retrieve the object; and, in the dark, determined it to be a long, sharp, metal...*shard*, of some kind. Very strange...could it have fallen, from the roof?

And then she saw him, by an emergency exit on the far side of the balcony—

The Sweet Hereafter, dressed in jet black, only his white face visible in the paucity of illumination. He didn't...he didn't look quite like Rob Sullivan...and he certainly didn't look like *her*, except for the superficials (personally, she felt she looked more like Marilyn Manson than the Revenant of Romance, she had totally fucked up on the eye-makeup, and...). It was like she was in the presence of some sort of archetypal Sweet Hereafter, some "real-life" figure upon which the movie was based. Which was crazy. Because. He was a fictional character, and fictional characters do not have an independent—much less three-dimensional—existence outside of the realm of their creators and keepers. But.

Could it be that the rituals really worked, that *this* was the *tulpa*—

He stared back at her with unreadable eyes that were little more than smoky holes, and any reading into them, into his intentions, that Tara came up with, was purely her projections—

The somber figure disappeared through the emergency exit, and so the brunette followed, like his wonky shadow, like a double of him manufactured bootleg in Mexico, and down she went on a flight of poorly lit stairs, stumbling on the last one and almost crashing to the ground, and always her eyes fixed on the Man, this Being, this specter, and soon she found herself in another large room—

—and soon she found herself standing in the middle of the Hispanic Halloween party. And it was strange, kind of like when she watched the Spanish

version of the 1931 Dracula, and the tan and brown faces—all of which had abruptly stopped dancing and fell eerily silent at Tara's appearance—looked upon her in expressions of abject horror she had up to that point only seen in movies, and they began throwing plastic cups of punch at her and letting out ear-splitting peals of terror, even the men, a few making the sign of the cross. And the Sweet Hereafter disappeared out another door, and Tara—black spandex-clad arms before her face protectively, as if the spilled punch might melt her—fought her way through the crowd, through the cups and the screams, so she could follow Him—so she could *be* with Him—

And before she knew it, she was out on the dark campus she had only minutes before been staring out into from above, and she could see him, see Him, way out in the distance, running, running away from her, and the soles of her booted feet smashed against the pale, smooth cobblestones of the pathway, cutting across the grass and leaving messy divots of sod and dirt in her wake in order to catch up on the distance, and the Sweet Hereafter ran into Carroll Hall, the science wing of Kennedy, and of course Tara followed—*of course* Tara followed—scrambling up the granite steps, slamming open the huge bronze doors, and now suddenly in the hallway, a hallway dark but for the lighted glass display cases mounted to either side of it, and in those display cases various specimens and scientific models. A baby calf preserved in a mason jar. A cutaway representation of the human head—skin, muscle, and bone pulled neatly away in stages with a bare eyeball and a canary-yellow brain that looked like popcorn. A series of bird skeletons stood upright in size order, as if they were lined up in school to have their picture taken. And dead flies and beetles lying on the bottom, partially covered in snowdrifts of dust and the ground pieces of their kind. Well. And the smell of ammonia was quite strong, wasn't it? That day. When Tara was chasing the Sweet Hereafter, dressed like the Sweet Hereafter, easily entering a building that normally would have been locked, running down the halls like a madwoman, sweat making her clown-white bleed and almost feeling like she—though admittedly having completely lost sight of her target at this point—was seeing her own self *run*—

Did he go down this corridor? She followed. And as she passed the double-doors of a lecture hall, a hand reached out and grabbed her by her long brown hair and dragged her inside.

*** *** ***

And what accosted Tara and pulled her towards the black stone laboratory table at the head of the auditorium-style room, what smacked her head into the side of the sink, sending blood pouring down over the side of her head in sheets, those things—and there was more than one, though to come up with an exact number would have been impossible due to their nature—were not human. They had no faces. They had no stable features, just abstractions, as if you were brave enough to keep your eyes on them—

—the *noise*! The buzzing noise! And the floor was shaking in great, heavy waves—

You could make out recognizable forms, like the head of a dog or a snake or a hawk, but it was so hard to keep one's eyes upon them, it was physically painful, and Tara felt within her own mouth a hard, metallic weighing down against her tongue and teeth, like the prelude to a seizure.

The beings lifted her up and laid her out on the laboratory table so that her bloody head was resting over the basin and her feet were laying over the edge, and they said, directly into her brain,

“Idiot!”

And Tara couldn't see hardly anything anymore, just a greasy blur infused with piercing, stomach-turning light, and she kept trying to get off the table, not in desperation, but out of some automatic reflex, like the cat who keeps coming back, casual, as if she had to leave so she could get some sleep and come in for classes the next day (which was actually very true), but the beings kept guiding her back to the table, and she heard them “say,”

“Wakey-wakey eggs-and-bakey!!!!”

At which point a heavy weight slammed into her right leg, impacting

directly on the knee and cracking and splintering up through the femur and down towards the ankle. And she began to scream, which started a mini-debate between two of them,

“Holy shit! That girl can holler.”

“Give her some dope.”

And then she felt better, not quite completely stoned but retaining a queer style of consciousness, and the sensation of a cool fluid on her head, and a coldness and a pressure, and she realized that they were cutting into her head, and she said in calm wonder,

“Hey. You’re cutting into my head.”

A platter of crystals were held up to the side of her face, so she could see—

“Are those going inside of me?”

And then she said,

“Can I have the purple ones?”

And *then* she said,

“Will they all fit in my brain? I don’t think they will all fit in that tiny little space.”

And finally,

“Hey...any chance those crystals might give me...power?”

One of them grabbed her right earlobe and twisted it painfully, pulling her close so she could hear that tight vibration plucking so painfully, booming in her skull:

“Dammit, woman! Don’t you ever learn????”

Tara felt the crystals slide in, slide into her brain, and it didn’t hurt, though it truly did feel odd, and part of the oddness was the registering of the sensation not as physical so much as visual, as if she was watching the operation on a monitor at the same time she was having it. When it was over, she tried to put her hand to her head to touch it, but her arm was gently guided down.

“Oh, I see—it’s still wet. Like a painting. My! I wonder if all the little sharp points and edges of the stones will show? I hope you tucked ‘em in real good!”

"Well, you will be considered rather odd, but we're sure you're quite used to that by now."

"But what happened to the Sweet Hereafter? And Mol-*eee...*"

Metal teeth cracked open her chest, and suddenly she was back at the party, a plate of soggy pasta in her hand.

"No, I just don't think he showed up," Molly said miserably, stabbing a miniature tomato with her spork.

*** *** ***

After the drinks she pilfered from the vampires were finished, and the sun was way down into the Earth and her mind free of the Memory, the witch pulled herself up, fingers hooking into the mesh of the railing for support, and shakily walked several feet over to where Pris and the others were. The petite vampire was leaning against the corner railing, against her back, her white cold legs wrapped around her bearded companion's naked torso. The rest of the vampires were gone, and Tara decided she should be, a well, for there was nothing more that could be done. Pris, her occasional lover, her so-called employer, her "Sis," was getting royally balled, and there was nothing more that could be done.

Except to fuck Glenn Mandible.

Glenn had been looking completely, inconsolably lost when she found him sitting in the middle of the long, lighted staircase, sipping a margarita through a thin straw, his elbows resting on his knees. He had found it *impossible* to strike up a conversation with anybody there—and with good reason, because he was only one of a handful of humans left at Dermaco, and vampires, in general, found humans absolute *dullards* in the small talk department. In fact, though they were very good at it if they needed to be, vampires *hated* small talk—and what appeared, at a distance, to be small talk was instead plans for sex, domination or murder. And the fact that Glenn was left alive and unturned was a mystery unto itself, because he was quite handsome. But perhaps—as the witch had pegged it, at first meeting—it was his personality. Perhaps Glenn tried too hard. Perhaps

despite his shallow exterior, there was a certain basic human decency about him, an earnestness. Perhaps the Undead detected—just by talking to him, just by being *near* him—that he would be the type to balk at all this blood-swapping. The witch had forgotten, after being immersed in the culture for so long—it wasn’t for everybody.

At any rate, Glenn was unbelievably easy to get into a broom-closet for a quick fuck—and Tara realized that, even without the intoxication, she probably could have had him any time she wanted. Why *didn’t* she? Sure, his personality was a bit on the oily side, but he looked decent and a fuck was a fuck, right? She was sure that a fuck was just a fuck to Pris. And how could it have surprised her—she knew this of her going into it, she knew the type. Everybody those days, it seemed, was hip to the notion of a fuck being just a fuck. Why not Tara? Why not just grab all the fucks you can?

The two stood in the narrow closet, amongst cans of white base paint and forbidding plastic jugs of solutions with long, carcinogen-sounding names; the recent wet of a mop brushing against the witch’s ankles. Glenn’s face was so close to her, so red and stoned—so attractive if everything else about this particular situation, including the fact of Glenn Mandible himself, was omitted. His attempts at kissing were clunky and schoolboyish, and at one point he almost took the tip of her nose into his mouth, that mouth that smelt of Peach Schnapps and raspberry flavoring and the funk of an empty stomach. And as he made a grab for her panties, as the reality of the impending biological event hit her through the haze of her inebriation, she slurred,

“Y’got a condom?”

“Uh, no...I don’t, sorry, I don’t carry any with me...if my wife found them in my wallet or something she’d get really *pissed* at me.”

Tara stared at his handsome head and briefly considered slamming it against the wall behind him until blood shot out of his nostrils.

But a fuck was just a fuck, after all...

“Well...I guess I *could* use my magicks to stem the tide of your semen, and cast a protective barrier across the mouth of my uterus.”

“Okay, cool,” he said, unzipping his pants, “that sounds neat...*what?!*”

*** *** ***

Tara left Glenn in the broom closet as soon as the deed was done and the spunk was spent and his dick hung limp and moist outside the fly of his rented tuxedo pants. She headed straight for the bar where she ordered a scotch plain, and she realized she had passed the point where she was in control, that now the alcohol was controlling her and the least she could hope for was a passing out during the ride home and a hangover that would, with enough hydration, last only until noon the next day. The dance floor was nearly empty, and all the partiers had grouped off to different shadowy places in the room. There was a dark stain on a part of the pearlised floor, and she was hoping it was a spilled Chardonnay—she was on the verge of getting sick from the alcohol, the room was spinning, she was trying to fight it and the last thing she wanted to do was...get...into...otherpeople’sbusiness, you know? *Leave it alone, Tara...*that was her motto for the last nine months she was at Dermaco...*leave it alone...leave it alone...*

And everywhere were undrunk glasses of wine and spirits—sad, useless, unloved, and damning.

And there was Pris.

“Tara,” sounded the crystalline voice.

“H’lo, Pris,”

Then Tara clutched her hand to her stomach.

“Think I’m gonna *hurl*, Pris.” She felt a cold firm hand on her lap.

“You just need some *fresh air*...why don’t we go out on the beach?”

The witch looked at her weakly.

“Can we...are we *allowed* to go on there?”

“I *paid* for the party, didn’t I,” the vampire said confidently, walking Tara out the door. “I can go wherever the hell I want.”

*** *** ***

The two sat on the cool, slightly damp sand, Tara crumpled up on Pris's arms. The witch hated this--hated making like she wasn't really mad at her, allowing herself to be in such a vulnerable position, making it so easy for the vampire to gleefully exploit her weakness as she was doing now. But--but she felt so *sick*. It was like the worst hell, and she regretted it, regretted drinking so much, and realized that she was in the hands of her body's rebellion, at least for the night, and a portion of the morrow. Her mind reached vainly for her magicks, but they were transparent and unattainable, and her thoughts lost in the pounding of the arteries in her head. She moaned in discomfort, and felt the soothing ice of Pris's hand over her eyes.

"It's okay, Sis...it will pass. Isn't it *beautiful* out here...on the beach?"

"Yah, s'great..."

"Did you have a good time--you know, except for your little tummy upset?"

"Yah, I guess..."

"I really do *value* you, Tara."

"Yah."

"I really mean it."

"Yah..." A white motorboat cut across the waters in the distance, a white gash of foam in its wake. "So how was *your* time, Pris--I mean, 'Sis'--Sissy-Pris."

Smirk.

"You are referring to my sex with Ivan, I assume?"

"'Assume' makes an 'ass' out of 'u' and 'me.'"

"I *saw* you, you know. Watching us."

"I was watching *nothing*," the witch replied with a strained chuckle, the light radiated from Casa de Claire de Lune reflecting off her diamond-studded pentagram. "I was merely *noting*. So *that's* his name, huh? Your boyfriend."

"I would hardly call him a 'boyfriend,' Tara."

"*Fuck-buddy*, then."

"*Ivan...*is my *companion*. He lives with me. I have two of them."

"That's good...one for when the other's in the wash."

"Tara--you know, vampire culture is a little bit *different* than your human one."

"I don't know about that," the witch dead-panned, looking straight up into the starless indigo sky.

"It's *natural* for vampires to be polyamorous--that means, having more than one part--"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I *know* what it means, I'm not a *total* idiot. And that's fine. *Really*. I never expected anything from you, Pris. I never expect anything from anybody. I just wanted what was coming to me, for the magicks--and you paid me back in spades. As far as the fucking is concerned--icing on the cake. That's all. Icing. I have my own 'companions'--guys on the side."

Pris cocked an eyebrow.

"Is that a fact?" Spite licked the corners of her eyes. "Well, that's surprising. I always pegged you for a stone-cold dyke."

"Haha, that *would* be convenient for you--wouldn't it? But no. Actually, I fuck guys. I *like* fucking guys. In fact, I just fucked a guy about 15 minutes ago."

The petite vampire's ice-blue eyes glittered prettily in the ambient light beyond the shore.

"I see. And who, might I ask, was that?"

"That's for me to know and you never to find out."

"I'll buy you a memory upgrade on the iPod."

"Glenn Mandible."

*** *** ***

By the time Pris and Tara headed back, after the briefest of brief canoodling that the witch's constitution could handle at the moment, the party was just about over. "Last Dance" was blasting over the abandoned, cup-and-liquid strewn dance floor, and the revelers checked out their coats and started to

head for the buses. Pris, who was partially holding up Tara on her left side--though small, it was an effortless task for a vampire--looked over at her contented employees and smiled. She was so glad everything went well tonight. She had briefly considered killing Tara on the beach and dumping her body in the water but she was glad she didn't. Sure, Bersee was gone and the company was hers, but the usefulness of the witch didn't have to stop there. There were Dermaco's competitors to think about. And after they were conquered, the company could branch out in other areas--clothing, soft-drinks, petrol, you name it. And there would always be some new obstacle, some new dragon to slay, and Tara would be right by her side, doing that voodoo that she did so well...

Besides, Pris had grown queerly fond of the woman, despite her abominable posture.

With every step Tara took she became sicker and sicker, her skin cast in a foreboding pallor. By the time she arrived with Pris to the exit, she was literally being carried by the vampire. The sea air, the schmaltz of the seashells and pearls, the white, partially-nude body of the female bartender who had served the witch her first drinks of the night being discretely carried by several vampires, and the voice of one of them saying,

“Quick...put her in Baggage...”

And above all, the icy-ice blast of the blue laser-like beautiful frightening psychic perfect eyes of Pris Baxter, so close to her, those eyes, and...*everything*.

“I was thinking,” the witch distantly heard Pris say, as if in a dream, “why don’t you ride back with us in the limo? There’s always room for one more...”

Tara opened her mouth as if to speak, and vomit flew. It was like the motherfucking Exorcist.

*** *** ***

The witch woke up a day-and-a-half later on the bed of her hotel room, plastered head-to-toe with bilious stomach contents. A message left on her voice-mail by Pris described how Tara spent the remainder of the previous night,

and it was almost like she could see the wicked curl of the vampire's smirking lips. There was, Pris recounted, much much of throwing up--throwing up on her, throwing up on others, throwing up on the side of the bus, throwing up in the limo (they had tossed her in the trunk), throwing up outside the limo, throwing up in the lobby of the hotel room, and, finally, blissful unconsciousness. The vampire seemed to think it all rather hilarious, and, since she was the recipient of a good deal of the initial up-chuckage--*and* a remorseless killer--perhaps it was best to leave it at that. Tara spent the rest of the day picking dried antipasto from her hair and vomiting water. She wondered off-hand if she had thrown up any crows or hedgehogs, but figured the vampire would have mentioned it.

She was still queasy the next morning, but decided to make the trek to work, as she had nothing better to do. Her pale, clammy body moved as quickly and assiduously as possible through the halls on the way to her office, a large pair of sunglasses hiding her face, and "Welcome To The Jungle" humming on her iPod. She figured she had become somewhat of an office celebrity--as far as making a jackass of herself by her graphic inability to hold her liquor. As she passed by the Sales department she noticed that two burly men from Facilities were carrying boxes out of Glenn Mandible's office. After poking her head in and seeing no Glenn, she went next door and inquired as to what the hell was going on.

"Oh, Glenn? He had to quit suddenly...Pris said his dad back in Spokane recently took a turn for the worse..."

THE HAMMER

The hammer will fall--it is inevitable.

Everything one fills one's life with--shopping, business meetings, television viewings, even fucking--it is all just buying time for that magic moment when the hammer drops. But for some, the hammer is gentle, or, at the very least, unintentional. And one might say that the fall of an unintentional hammer really isn't the act of a hammer at all--it is merely an *accident*. Hammers, by their very nature, are intentional. Hammers have a person's name inscribed on its eye like Tolkien's ring, hammers are personal. And the hammer will fall. And some are agents of the hammer, and some are the recipients of its unforgiving blow--and all are bound within the story that brought it all together

The first victim of the hammer, on that merry season, was Boris. And it was fitting that he went first, went quick, and went neat, for really, he wasn't a character deserving of much more. After providing Rache Merrywether with some particularly useful information the short, red-haired vampire decided that it would be most expedient to rid him from the surface of this blue-green marble, and so she had a member of her Caress place a tip to Pris regarding missing bottles of concentrated Victorian Allure and directing her to check her stockroom. Three days later Boris awoke from his regularly scheduled hibernation time to find himself lying on the floor--to which room he did not know--atop some sort of white plastic tarp that ran over the floor and all the furniture and was clipped to the walls. The first thing that struck the tan, platinum-haired vampire was that it looked rather a lot like a photo shoot. Then he saw Ivan standing over him with the antique moss-stained axe from the bathroom door.

Pris briefly had Vlad Tepes-esque notions of keeping the head and preserving it and displaying it on a pike to serve as a warning to uppity clan members and employees, but fortunately subtlety and decorum won out. Besides, there was no place for such a grim object in the Baxter residence, for the holidays were merely weeks away, and the fact of her turning nearly 15 years

ago never wiped away her love for Santa, strings of popcorn, and Christmas carols, though, obviously, she had some beef with Christ personally. And so the empty space created by Boris's quick, neat exit was filled with an eleven-foot monster of a pine tree, its prodigious height taking full advantage of the living quarter's elevated ceiling.

Sadly, brother Gabriel was taking no such joy in the season, and not simply because the act of a vampire indulging in a Christian holiday that celebrated the birth of the figure in whose name various Hunters throughout history--including their own father--went about the slayage of her own kind was retarded and signified a deeper dysfunction.

Mia had never called.

Mia had never called.

Mia's failure to call Gabriel at first struck him as merely odd, then somewhat dissonant, then rather puzzling, then vexing, and before the vampire knew it, he was utterly depressed. It made no sense for her not to call. Even rules of basic human decency--er, never mind. But they had an *understanding*. She wasn't like all the Others, she saw him for *him* and related to him not as something from which things were to be gotten but as a worthwhile companion. Mia was different. Mia was intelligent. Mia was sweet. And they had a bond. They had a bond.

Perhaps he really did make her angry in some way. But how? He racked his brains and ransacked his memory for some incident, some carefree, callous comment he might have thoughtlessly tossed her way--but there wasn't any. He treated her magnificently. He treated her better than any other woman that he ever knew--except for his mother. Even Pris--even with Pris he might call her a bitch or say some snide, cutting remark. But never with Mia. Mia never deserved it. Mia never did anything wrong. Mia had that quality of purity, of gentleness, of a sincere and loving and tender nature, that was rare even among human women.

So why didn't she call???

Gabriel missed it all--the home in Shore's End, sharing with Mia her wonder over nascent vampirehood, teaching her, affording her the chance to feel

her way through the process, to have a mentor to guide her--how he wished those many years ago he had the advantage of the same. But no, the time after his turning was *black*, was almost feral--and if it wasn't for his sister's unique vision and iron will, he might be barely existing in some wastes beyond suburbia, in a dump or a tunnel, savaging unlucky motorists, hitchhikers, and the merely lost.

However, Pris's touch was never gentle, even when she tried to be, it was always tainted with the poison of her essential nature. Even the Christmas ornaments she was hanging, and the lights, and the whole damned tree--it all carried with it her *stamp*, that invisible quality that could take a freshly-plucked daisy and turn it suddenly sinister. The little vampire lay atop the black sectional in a worn white T-shirt and jeans, staring at the ceiling fan in a depressive haze, ignoring both his sister--the very picture of the season in a luxurious red-and-green sweater and velvet black leggings--and the *Patti LaBelle Sings 30 Christmas Favorites* CD that was humming on the Bose.

"You're wilting my tree," Pris commented in all seriousness, removing a glass Radko Betty Boop ornament out of its box and hanging it from a branch. "You're *killing* my tree with your negative vibes."

"The tree is already *dead*," her brother replied, his voice dripping with disgust.

"You know, it wouldn't kill you to show a little Christmas Spirit, especially after I went through all this trouble."

"It wouldn't kill me because I'm already dead--like that stupid tree--and I'm not celebrating any holiday for *Christ*. He didn't die to deliver *us*, I'm sure."

Pris placed an antique brown-clad German Santa doll under the tree, next to several Steiff bears.

"You are much too hard on the man, Gaby. He died and came back from the dead--just like us. Worshipers drink his blood and eat his flesh--I mean, how much more of an undead-friendly god can you get?"

"Why don't you go tell that to *Dad*? I'm sure he'll get a big kick out of your theological theories while he's impaling you and cutting off your head just to be

sure."

Pris was suddenly crouched over his body on the sectional, seething, forcing him to turn his head away from the venom of her spit.

"There will be no talk about cutting off heads in this house! Understand?!"

"*Alright, alright! God!* I thought you didn't even really like Boris."

"I don't like being put in the position to have to kill people. To have my hand forced, and to become..."

The little vampire's pale blue eyes met his sister's.

"You're a *vampire*, Pris."

Pris frowned and slid beside him on the sectional, resting a cold arm on his cold chest.

"I think the word 'vampire' is open to a lot of interpretation," she said, her ice-blue eyes staring past his chest into space. "And anyway, I don't *enjoy* it. Killing. I do it because the occasion calls for it. It's a duty. I don't like it--like *you* seem to."

An exasperated sigh passed through her brother's angel lips.

"I don't enjoy it either, Pris. I need blood and I take it. To survive."

"But you *enjoy* the *romance* of it, don't you Gaby," she said with a sneer, pulling her small, lithe body up on one elbow. "I know what you do...where you get all those trinkets in that jewelry box in your room."

"You don't know *anything* of what I do, or what I think," Gabriel snapped back, "and you should mind your own damn business!"

"You're my *brother*--you are my business!"

"I'm *nothing* of yours," he shouted, trying to tear himself away from the sudden grasp of his sister's long, powerful pointed fingers on his biceps. She leaned in close to his face, her own a mask of smirking spite. "Really? Then whose are you, Gaby? That bitch on Long Island? Why don't you live with *her* then, huh? She can pay your way...only...you haven't *seen* her for quite a while, *have* you?" Her blue eyes shone sadistically "No, you haven't seen her, you never go there anymore...why *is* that, Gaby, why do you think that is...because she didn't want to be seen with a *boy* anymore?"

“I'M NOT A BOY!” he screamed in her face, his expression wild with fury and panic. “I'M A 32-YEAR-OLD MAN!”

“Don't *fool* yourself, Gaby-baby--you've got a *boy's* voice, a *boy's* body,” she grabbed his crotch, “and a *boy's* dick!”

“*Get your fucking hands off of me!*”

“Just a *boy*,” she continued, squeezing his cock painfully, digging her nails into it. “Just a *boyboyboyboy...*”

Gabriel snarled bestially and swiped her face with his fingernails, causing her to literally jump off the sectional and reappear in the center of the room, cradling her bleeding face.

“You...*bastard*! You bastard! Look what you've done! How am I supposed to explain this at work?!”

“Rough sex,” he answered with an angry smile.

“Fuck you...just *fuck you!* Ungrateful bastard! Why don't you just move the hell out of here?! Go move in with your bitch girlfriend--if she still *wants* you!”

“She's more of a woman than *you'll* ever be, you evil bitch!” And with that the little vampire ran into his room, tossed a few items of clothing and a bottle of Victorian Allure in a book-bag along with some crumpled bills, and climbed spider-like out the window.

*** *** ***

Pris's decision to foist the holiday spirit upon her fellow Dermaco employees was met outwardly with enthusiasm and privately with mixed feelings. To many of them, especially the newest to the pleasures of the Second Life, the last thing they wanted to do was contemplate anything even remotely religious. But attendance to the Christmas party at the Rusty Nail pub--especially rented out for the occasion--was, like the rest of the company's morale-boosting activities, Unsaid Mandatory. Besides, Pris pointed out that if anybody found the “Christ” in “Christmas” offensive they could always call it Xmas, exchange presents, and shut the fuck up.

The festive event--its details, logistics, and guest-list--was also the last crucial bit of information poor Boris imparted on Rache before his demise. The Caress leader couldn't help but chortle at the utter contemptible pretentiousness of the idea of a Christmas celebration for vampires--was there nothing *sacred* to that woman? Pris wouldn't stop until they were all just humans with a particularly severe iron deficiency--though of course Rache herself and the Caress weren't invited on this little journey to "civilization."

Some vampires, it seemed, like those of Generra--they could stand it, the repression and sublimation and impersonation and masquerade. But not Rache--not Caress--they were the *true* vampires, and as such deserved to thrive and multiply. Generra--fucking Generra, they were watering down the whole species with the virus of their domesticated, self-defeating, self-negating philosophy. Thanks to Pris and her whacked-out, frankly suicidal theories, vampires the world over, infected by this "are we not men" meme, would make themselves vulnerable, *weaker*, and more open to both human detection and attack--for having increasing numbers of the Undead in polite Veal society could only heighten the chances of the vampiric conspiracy being revealed. Far better to operate outside the mortal schema altogether--and have the deaths and disappearances blamed on not vampires but the larger sub-culture whose pelt the Caress assumed.

And to the noble end of protecting her kin and kind--and, in a larger sense, the entire species--Rache had come up with Operation Killemall. Operation Killemall involved not some mere assemblage of savages with sticks and bottles and bricks but a finely-detailed, painstakingly coordinated plan that involved several different fronts and *all* of Caress.

The slightly stocky, diminutive vampire, her fire-engine red tresses pulled back in a long braid (so the hair wouldn't be getting in the way everywhere when she was looking at maps and blueprints and so forth), had traded her corsets and thigh-high shit-kickers for an elegant dark red blouse with weeper cuffs, a pair of black flares, and black zip-up boots with a smart red stripe down the middle of each one; and all the many, clashing pieces of Gothic jewelry she used to wear

had been whittled down to one particularly striking large silver ring depicting a rose with a skull nestled subtly inside. She justified such a sartorial change by the reasoning that if she simply dressed like one of the Caress, then she was *just* one of the Caress--just another punk motherfucker, just another one of the gang. But success, she realized, hinged on always being a little better dressed than everybody else, because people and vampires were shallow, and sometimes also rather stupid and attracted to tinfoil and strands of tinsel. And if the cut of her pants impressed and intimidated more than a bottle to the face--*progress*, she supposed.

Walking through the Sausage Factory--both floors of which she had now officially rented, putting the money found in victim's wallets and ATM accounts to good use, instead of just fucking it away--she felt a level of confidence regarding the success of her mission and her ability to lead Caress that she had never experienced before. Rache observed proudly her vampires working industriously on their assigned tasks--each one operating within a special committee that made the best use of his or her talents--like contented school children, every once in a while giving them a brief, reserved smile of approbation or even a "nice job." She had just had the walls painted upstairs in three coats of basic primer white, ordering the ragged collage of pictures, drawings, and clippings to be torn down or scraped off--she felt the change would place her kin in a more focused, *achievement*-oriented frame of mind, something pinups of pierced Gothic twats and that unfortunate moron Rob Sullivan did not promote. And she just ordered some lovely furniture from IKEA that would be coming in soon.

And though, through the intervening years, the red-haired vampire could no longer bring herself to love or form attachments to individuals--Judy Lu having become just another of the Nameless, falling back into the maelstrom of the anonymous without so much as a fight, the fact of which in itself proved to Rache that she was Unworthy--she did find within herself a passionate devotion to the *idea* of the Vampire...the Vampire Ideal. And while she might feel unnerved by the slayage of this Caress or that--they were all the same to her, the very definition of minions and Red Shirts. What was unforgivable and a call to war

regarding murders of Caress, such as the massacre that precipitated Operation Killemall in the first place, was that the act was a blow to her idea of what the Vampire was, an insult, a humiliation. The Vampire, the *true*, strong Vampire--should brook no humiliation, no injury to the integrity of its Race.

For the Vampire ideal, the vampire identity, was sacred. It was the adamantium skeleton that held her up. It was *everything*. And Rache felt so strongly about the issue that she recently wrote up a pamphlet detailing her beliefs that she distributed to all the members, and which would be given as law to all future Caress. And then, over time, the undesirable vampires--the weak, the infirm, and those possessing assimilationist Generra views--would be eliminated, and then there would be just Caress, and then there would be no more need for the word "Caress," and there would just be Vampire.

She regarded a pair of male Caress--one sporting a blue spiky mohawk, the other with a more conservative buzzcut with the number 91 shaved into the back--who were going through a list of addresses printed out on wide, lined Daisy-wheel paper, highlighting certain names, and then cross-referencing them with a smaller handwritten list in a spiral notebook. Young-looking things, the acne still frozen on the punk one's face, and couldn't have been more than 16 or 17 when they were turned. How rapt in attention and studious they were when given something of importance to accomplish, when given a mission in life, when given an identity they could take *pride* in. No, the days of Caress lolgagging on the stained floors of the Sausage Factory, idly licking dry blood off their fingers--that was over. It was the time for Work, for Planning, for a View to the Future--

"Nice job," she said in a tone that was not too warm, not too cold, not overly-appreciative, but not too imperious, and not too committed, but not too lightly-said, and which strived to be everything it needed to be at as little cost as possible in relation to maximum yieldings.

*** *** ***

Tara was a bit surprised to witness the amount of holiday cheer--in

decorative form, at any rate--that infiltrated Dermaco from paneled ceiling to carpeted floor. Miniature Christmas trees on ever floor, pictures of sleigh bells and Santas taped to every door, even fake snow drifts sprayed on the walls of the glass-encased conference room and sprigs of mistletoe hanging cheekily over the well-trod spots in the halls and corridors. *Did vampires even celebrate Christmas*, she wondered--didn't they have Blood Day or Bathory Tuesday or something like that?

Not that the witch had any beef against the holiday personally, or felt dismayed or rankled by the festive displays that greeted one everywhere in the offices. She never really considered Christmas special one way or the other, special in any sort of real, religious way--there was absolutely no proof that the Christ Child was born on December 25th (it was sketchy enough as to whether he even had existed at all), and by a shocking coincidence there were a slew of Pagan gods whose births were traditionally attributed to the date. Of course, there was not a lot of proof or historical validity to back much of the magick lore she believed in and utilized for her spells--and perhaps it all boiled down to Belief. The witch felt that gods and religion were not eternal and universal but *personal*--and that maybe, perhaps, everything about the Cosmos one resided in was personal as well.

But what effect would the unchosen belief system of one's youth have, consciously or unconsciously, on this personal cosmos? Might shadowy memories of a vengeful God as described by some fire-and brimstone preacher one listens to in Sunday School have some unanticipated, undesired effect?

The witch regarded thoughtfully the paper Santa that was taped to her door during one of her extended hibernations in her office. The red coat and pointy red hat, the long beard, the obscene belly hanging guiltless over his thick black belt--how much of an obscure pagan idol, on the level of Mickey Mouse, Shirley Temple, and the Golden Calf, could one possibly come up with? And what beef could she have against such a figure, when she herself worshiped blue gods and dragons and Norns and shit?

And what in the hell happened to Halloween? Was she adrift in the

Pumpkin Patch, vainly awaiting her diety, when it blew by and left her behind? How could Halloween--*Samhain*, by jiminy--have passed and her not notice, when it was the emblematic holiday for witches world-over? Oh yes, she remembered now: it was because *every* day was Halloween to her, in one way or another. Even her thoroughly civilized existence as the best-paid assistant in Dermaco history--what was it really, more than being a witch surrounded by vampires? Sure, she had some decent conversation around the watercooler with the "boys" and ladies' room chats about scented soaps and whatnot, but in the end, they went home to feast on blood and she went home to bleed on a ritual circle. It was the reality that the unreality of Dermaco structure skillfully hid like the products they sold hid blemishes and dark spots--

The first thing the witch noticed when she entered Pris's office for the morning chit-chat was the three angry red scratches that lay parallel to each other to the side of her left eye and continued down her cheek towards the corners of her mouth. It was still fresh, and the wet blood had seeped past the makeup she had spread over it, the cuts muted but still visible. Tara wasn't going to mention anything--there seemed no comfortable way to do so and perhaps it was just a vampire thing and she just didn't understand. But it was Pris herself who volunteered the information shortly after her assistant entered, aware no doubt of how noticeable the wounds were, despite her best efforts.

"I'm sure you're wondering about...*this*," she said in as casual a voice as she could muster, pointing to her left cheek with a long, white finger. "To be honest, I had a little *trouble* with my brother the other day...no reason to be alarmed, I was otherwise unmolested, and everything's under control." The petite vampire's face softened in an expression of pity, her head turning so that the untouched side of her face struck a perfectly-framed profile in the window behind her. "Gabriel...is a very troubled boy. I deeply wish there was more I could do to help him. But ever since Mother died, well--he's been pretty damn near useless, to be frank about it. An emotional cripple." She sighed and shook her head slightly and affectedly as if to shake off a bad cold, and put both small white palms flat on the surface of her desk. "But enough of that. Anyway. So you got

the invite, then, you're going to the party? And sit down already, you're making me nervous..."

The witch took her seat and nodded.

"Yeah, sure, I'm going--though I'm still recovering from the *last* one."

"Well, I suppose that's one of the dangers of having all the liquor virtually to yourself in a ballroom full of vampires...but not to worry with this event. It's going to be completely private, no need for us to 'dissemble' with food and drink. I'm even having a stock of medical plasma on tap..."

"That sounds like one of those Amicus films..."

"...and it's going to be simply a *divine* time, a divine time. We'll have special portions of refreshments for you of course--though you really ought to pace yourself this time..."

The witch looked contrite.

"I will..."

"You completely ruined my dress, you know."

"So you've told me."

"It cost \$1100 dollars."

"I know..."

"And your stomach contents..." The vampire shuddered. "...they're like *acid*, it burned the color right out of the material...what do you *eat*?"

"So how about those Christmas decorations, huh?" Tara asked, rubbing the back of her neck sheepishly. "You spearhead that?"

The vampire sat back in her ergonomic chair and pressed the tips of her long white fingers together contentedly.

"Of course. Nothing happens at Dermaco without my express consent. I'm the *President*."

"But no menorahs, I've noticed."

"Would you like a menorah, Tara?"

"Nah, I'm just breakin' your balls."

"Are you Jewish?"

"Why? I thought all humans looked the same to you."

“No reason--I just thought the idea of a bisexual Jewish witch to be rather amusing--there would be so many chats on AOL you could participate in.”

“I’m also partially Hispanic, but it’s a secret even to myself.”

“Well, I’m completely *white*,” the vampire replied, as if it was something that needed to be said.

“Literally.”

There was a small blue-and-silver plastic Christmas tree on a corner of her desk, no more than a foot high. It was decorated with tiny, finely-detailed ornaments, had a miniature angel blowing on a trumpet perched on its apex, and was wired to a Lilliputian set of lights that blinked on and off in groups, first one patch of the tree shining, then another, throwing multi-colored illumination on the alabaster of the vampire’s uninjured cheek. Tied on the tree, by its base, was a handwritten card from “Baby” Bersee.

“Do you like Christmas, Tara? Or is it too *goody-goody* for your occult sensibilities?”

“Got no problem with it.”

“I *love* the holidays...“ she tipped her head back, a jointed cushion at the top of the chair accompanying the motion, and smiled. “When I was a little girl, we had the best Christmases. Daddy would drag in a 10-foot, 11-foot freshly-cut pine, the sap still moist, and mount it to the center of the family room. And then on Christmas morning me and Gaby would wake up real early--barely able to sleep the night before, we were so excited--and there would be all the presents under the tree...and then we’d open all the gifts, and Mom would just swoop in and carefully save all the paper and ribbon--not because she was going to reuse them, of course, we weren’t poor or anything like that, she was just so sentimental. And then Daddy would get out the Polaroid and me and Gaby would pose under the tree, in our footed pajamas, and the smell of that row of fresh, instant photography, black sides facing up, the covered white developing...”

It gave Tara a weird, sad feeling to see her friend--her boss--in such a reverie in the blinking light of the tiny tree, with the colossal signage of Times Square as a backdrop.

“You had a good childhood, I take it?”

“It wasn’t perfect--but it *is* in my memories. And memories are the only things that are really real, except for this immeasurable fraction of a second. It was a *good* life, all things considered. And then, obviously, things *happened*...and that was unfortunate...but in the end, I’m not regretful or bitter or going to portray myself as some sort of victim because of it. I’ve been...a stronger person because of my experiences. I certainly don’t see vampirism as some sort of--handicap or drawback. Through being turned, I found who I really *was*.”

“Do...you really believe that?”

Pris looked at her dangerously.

“Anywho,” the witch replied nervously, pulling herself up out of the chair, “Yes, I’ll definitely be going to the party, thanks for the invite and all. I’ll just get out of your hair now and let you do presidently sorts of things.”

The vampire regarded the tree on her desk for a second, thoughtfully running the top of her red fingernail over its tiny white branches--then suddenly turned to Tara with an expression of enthusiasm, her ice-blue eyes glimmering and wide.

“Isn’t this *great*? Just...everything...” She stretched her arms out at her sides as if trying to literally embrace that which she was speaking of. “This whole holiday season? Can you feel it?”

“Uh...sure.”

Pris impulsively plucked the pens and pencils out of the metal mesh cup on her desk and handed the silver-hued object to her stunned assistant.

“Here you go--*Merry Christmas!*”

“Are you high?”

“No, c’mom--it’s *Christmas!* It’s a time for giving! Think of it as a placeholder for your *real* gift. Hahahahahaha...C’mom, it’s *fun*.”

“Okay...” the witch said, looking down at the metal cup in her hands in bewilderment. “But I don’t have anything for you yet...do you want me to go get something from my office for you...like a ...*stapler*, or something?”

Pris shook her head, still grinning that manic grin. *The woman has just*

gone completely balmy, Tara thought. Perhaps it was...the weight of memory...

"No, everything's copasetic here. You just enjoy--enjoy your cup--don't forget to put lots of pens in them--you've certainly stolen enough from the supply closet." Still smiling. Yeesh.

The witch left her boss's office completely flabbergasted, wearing the cup over one hand and thumping it with the other. It was the last time she ever saw Pris alive.

*** *** ***

Gabriel spent the first weeks after fleeing the loft simply drifting in the City, the City that looked so big and so empty and so quiet in the minutes after dawn. He was, for all intents and purposes, just another transient, journeying without a horizon, passing disconnectedly by the giant, polished stone and glass facades of midtown. Blood was sought and provided for at night, and hibernation in the apartment or basement of his victims kept him rested for the next day's events. But though the women he chose--over 30, mostly in their 40s, affluent, pretty--did provide a momentary fillip of romance, a fleeting fantasy for him to escape within, when the act was over, and the body cold, he felt an attenuated anxiety, he felt a new sensation, one that had been building for a while in subtle tremors and sight discomforts, but which now drew itself up to its fullest heightened power and engulfed him--*loneliness*.

Pris could be horrid, and it was his goal and desire for at least the last decade to separate himself from her for good--but she did express a certain degree of devotion to him, even if it was wrapped up and tangled within the snakes of her own mind. And Mia--the issue of Mia was just a big blank, an unanswered question that haunted the little vampire on almost every second of the day, that forced his mind in a mode of operation he didn't want to have, one of constant and obsessive thinking and rumination, and it was so uncomfortable, and life for him was so much simpler before he had ever met her--

What good was it to meet her and to take her into this life, and to alter

things in his mind this way, only for her to disappear? It...it was ridiculous. It didn't make sense.

He was feeling restless, boxed-in in the tiny studio of his latest victim, a streamlined modernist pad that reminded him of the one he left, the framed Paul Klee exhibition poster on the wall, the pseudo-Eames chairs, the sterile kitchenette with nary a utensil or dish or food-stuff uncontained, uncovered. So cold and clean--he didn't like it. He regretted killing the woman so soon, because he really could have used the conversation, but he was so damn hungry last night. She lay under her fold-out bed, wrapped up in an off-white sheet. So many lonely women in this city. Were their intentions towards him purely maternal, did he himself pervert them with the poison of his eyes? Or did they know what they were doing? *Who was to blame?*

He never had these questions with Mia. He always thought his relationship with her had a transparency about it that made such questions unnecessary. How often in one's life could one find somebody like that?

Gabriel held out not a lot of optimism for this world.

*** * * * *

The little vampire remembered the woman mentioning a recently-renovated sunning deck on the roof of the building, and how the view of the City from that vantage point was something terrific. He had seen the tops of many buildings in his time, but he was bored and had nothing else better to do, and he hoped such an expansive view might relieve him of the terrible claustrophobia he felt, something the streets of Midtown, even at such an early morning hour, would not be able to provide. He methodically spread the Victorian Allure on his bare chest and neck, over his arms and around his face, then pulled his periwinkle hoodie over his still-wet skin, the lotion between him and the rough cotton itchy. A little old Asian lady with thick square sunglasses and her little terrier rode up in the elevator with Gabriel, and the gray dog, which reminded him of Toto, seemed incensed by the sight and/or scent of the little vampire, rolling its eyes and letting

out angry, staccato barks, straining against his leash until prompting the apologetic old woman to hold it with both hands and say,

“Sorry--this dog, he *crazy*.”

The lady and her pet left him at the 25th floor, and the sandy-haired little man continued onward to 32, at which point he disembarked the cab, went up a very short flight of stairs, and pushed in a black metal door until the chill wind hit his face and the vast blue and white sky greeted him. His hair flew around with the whims of the air, but of course he felt no cold. There were several grey mesh chairs and chaise lounges on the site, and somebody's abandoned pink towel, stiff and bleached from the elements, was bunched in a corner, a forgotten remnant from the summer. Gabriel walked up to the brick and metal railing, rested his pale hands upon it, and looked.

There was no order to it, this city--just a horror of disparate constructions too closely set. It was like cutting out the halves of two different faces from a magazine and then pasting them together to make a whole--nothing lined up. If you kept your eyes above it all, above the tallest spire, it wasn't too bad--but how could you live that way?

Gabriel's mind was slipping into a greater alienation than the one that was a part of his basic personality. Staring out into the asymmetrical, crowded landscape he felt himself squeezed out, lost, falling into the hairline crack between two wildly dissimilar buildings. He was in the grip of a silent, emotionless despair.

And why didn't *he* call Mia? Why place all the responsibility on her? Maybe he should have called. Maybe he should have tried harder. It's just that they had an easygoing relationship, a *bond*, a trust, that forwent such...strategies. He always thought it would be natural.

When he got back to the woman's apartment he called Mia. He got her answering machine, and it wasn't even a real voice, it was some sort of robotic female message that must have come wth the phone.

The little vampire though for several seconds, hearing the blank hiss of the recorder on the other end, then hung up. He slouched on the edge of the bed,

resting his chin in his hand, looking into space with his pale blue eyes and telling himself that he never wanted to feel like he felt when he was on that roof ever again.

Gabriel impulsively dropped to the floor and looked at the white bundle under the bed. He lay there, on his side, chewing a fingernail, looking at the blank linen face of the mummy.

No, maybe he didn't try hard enough with Mia.

He got up, grabbed his bag, left the apartment, and headed for Shore's End.

*** * * * *

Tara knew that red was normally Pris's color, and that if they both showed up to the party in the same color dress they'd be like twins or something and look stupid and then the vampire would get all pissy about decorum or *faux pas* or somesuch nonsense bullshit--but it really was such a *nice* dress, even if not in a style she usually wore. It was long and velvet and had a swirling, spiraling pattern embossed upon its surface that looked almost Celtic in design. It reminded the witch of some sort of princess dress, almost a fairy-tale dress, and the whimsy and fantasy of it was something she hadn't indulged in ever since she got to Dermaco. It was far more something that a Disney heroine would wear than an employee at the company Christmas party. She looked herself in the mirror above the bureau of her hotel room, made a sort of pirouette type movement so she could see the lush material sway in the motion, then stopped and suddenly thought of Molly Griep.

Ah, Molly--how in the hell did things turn out so bad?

It was like Molly and all these others died so long ago, and here Tara was, in her latest incarnation, being as if this was the only life she ever lived.

And Molly had dreamed years ago that Tara would be what she eventually became--a woman in a stiff, conservative haircut and a business suit. And so what did that mean? Was Molly *psychic*, then? Was the world really so

predestined?

The witch's cell phone rang.

"Hi, I'm Katy Huang, from the secretarial pool. I've been asked by Ms. Baxter to call you about a shipment of plasma she need to have picked up from White Plains."

"*White Plains?!*" Tara groaned and began pacing her hotel room. "I've got to...the party starts in an hour! Can't she...can't she get a *courier*, or something? Can't *you* do it?!"

"I'm sorry Ms. Tarantino, but Ms. Baxter said that her usual courier is indisposed and you are the only other person she trusts with it."

"Oh...Jesus! (sigh) Fuck. Okay, alright. Alright. What's the address?"

Fuckin' Pris, the witch thought, as she sat fuming at the back of a cab listening to Led Zeppelin on headphones. *Unfuckinbelievable*. One minute she's "appreciated" and credited for the vampire's entire cosmetics empire, the next minute she's a freakin' blood trafficker. Tara looked guiltily at the iPod she held in her hands. Maybe Dust was right--maybe she *was* an ungrateful little cunt. Well. She supposed she had a whole *night* to party. And. Every sip of plasma the vamps took meant one less corpse, which she supposed was always a *good* thing.

It was just that--

Dealing with *Pris*--

--the witch, she always felt like such a fool.

Tara stared blankly out the window, watching the City speed by her sight as the taxi worked its way Uptown. The tchotchkies of Christmas were everywhere--big tinsel snowflakes wired to the tops of streetlights, red satin bows affixed to concrete planters & garbage cans, and a secular Nativity scene in every department store window. People dressed in coats and hats and trailing packs of similarly-suited children flooded the streets. holding bundles and packages and bags close to their person like refugees, like Old Navy utility vests and scented candles from Pier 1 were going out of style, and such a burdened, frantic look in their eyes, this drive to spend, to complete their shopping lists, to

do it because doing it was everything.

Human life--was *this* human life? Was this human culture? Vampires never had such a burdened, frantic look on their faces, imprinted into their eyes and readable from 20 paces away--unless they were starving for blood. And who was better, the human or the vampire?

Tara felt a kinship with neither.

Might there be a *third* species, she wondered, resting her head against the glass, her face doubled in the reflection.

And that's when the City turned into the realm of the Dead. It was happening again. Like the negative of a photograph, and the witch, determined to be calm, tore her eyes away from the sight of the Necropolis and looked at the driver, who was of course also one of the Dead. And she closed her eyes and counted the seconds to when it would be over, and the iPod began to play a strange, unearthly song, and she switched it off and it was still playing and she gritted her teeth and fell into a sort of coma-like trance that broke only when she heard the driver say--

"This address, it's further than White Plains. It's further than White Plains."

And outside the window she could see only lifeless stalks of grass.

*** *** ***

It was friggin' farmland, is what it was--dead fields of foliage as far as the eye could see, fenced in here and there by barbed wire. They were parked in front of a barn-like warehouse that had the faded sign "Nature's Breath Bottled Spring Water" hand-painted onto the wooden slats. Beyond that structure were several dingy white tanks about four stories in height and shaped like coffee-cans. And that was it. The place was like something from a goddamn Chirico painting.

The witch asked the driver to wait for her, that he could keep the meter running. The man, a West-Indian in a knitted green-and-orange skull cap, looked at her dubiously.

“Come on,” she answered his suspicious brown-black eyes in exasperation. “You *have* to wait here...I’m going to be *Fucked* if you leave. You can trust me--I work for Dermaco, a multi-million dollar publically-traded corporation. Look...” She produced her iPod from her bag and handed it to him. “You can hold on to this in the meantime, as *security*, or something. I’m going to pay you for this entire thing when it’s over, with whatever extra fees you have for the distance and trouble.”

“This is further than White Plains,” he said with a peculiar degree of *gravitas*.

“I know, I know...just...wait...*please*. Okay?”

The tall brunette in the red velvet dress traveled the perimeter of the warehouse, stepping awkwardly through the dry yellow grass, looking for a door. And it smelt like shit around there--God! *Fuckin’ Pris*, she muttered under he breath like a mantra, pissed now more than ever at her little courier assignment. No wonder the taxi driver looked at her cockeyed--this was like making a freakin’ heroin connection like in “Easy Rider” or some shit. Was this even legal plasma she was getting? Or was this some blackmarket Robin Cook bullshit? And why was she complaining only *now*? Hadn’t it *always* been like this, always--always the illegality, always the subtlest whiffs of death? And do you really think Glenn went to Spokane?

But things--they were going so *good*--and now--it’s like she finally had a place to *be*--

The flimsy wooden door with the small busted padlock swung free at the pressure of Tara’s hand. The interior was empty but for a couple of craters of old bottles in a corner and the badly-decomposed body of a priest under several layers of moldy, fetid pages from the New York Times.

When she ran back outside, the taxi was gone.

*** *** ***

Gabriel was nervous and terrified and excited and thrilled to see Mia

again, all those feelings bound up together in the chest of his adolescent's body. The biting evening cold had no effect on him as he walked down the sidewalks of Shore's End with just his hoodie and jeans, his scraggly sandy-blond hair blowing in and out of his pale blue eyes. Though his sister's attachment to the gaudy rituals of the season irritated him, the little vampire did take an odd comfort at the elaborate, lighted displays on the lawns he passed--perhaps it was because the sight of the damned-childish, oft-grotesque things provided a welcome counterpoint to the sterility of the apartment he had just left, and the loft and the general aesthetic of his sister beyond that. Or maybe it was merely the fact that this was Mia's neighborhood--that it and everything in it was a part of her, at least in his eyes. And there were places in the City, too, that were parts of Mia, and sometimes, when he was alone--in the ether, or in his body, there was something, always *something*, that seemed to be a part of her.

And maybe he hadn't tried hard enough with her.

The exterior of the Cefalu residence was remarkable in the fact that it only had one measly little Christmas decoration on it, a hastily-taped up, crooked paper cutout of an angel topped by a red ribbon. The lights were all out except a dim one that glowed behind the blinds of the livingroom. Gabriel had remembered this day as the one in which Frank had the night-shift, and he hoped that it still held. Of course, he could handle the man if he was there, one way or another. Frank was *easy*. And perhaps things could soon be as they were before, all three living together, such a happy family. Yes, the little vampire said to himself, that might be easiest. Ideally, he wanted Mia to himself. But to have Frank in the picture, just for a while, or whatever--it was okay because Gabriel knew she didn't really love him anymore. And it was all about the *bond* for the little vampire, though it never used to be this way before he met the woman. And to be bonded--it was wonderful, but could also make one very uncomfortable, needy, hungering--discomfited feelings that he intended to address and end today.

Because maybe he hadn't tried hard enough with her.

He curled his fingers into a fist and knocked on the door. He heard a faint murmur from inside, but nobody answered. The little man frowned. He didn't like

this. He went down the porch steps and walked around the house until he got to the back door. *Locked*. Mia used to always keep it unlocked when he was around, so he could come or go discretely as he pleased without him having to crawl up or down the side of the house. But now it was locked. Maybe she was unwell. Maybe she was in trouble, maybe--

He calmly tore the lock off with his hand and pushed the door in gently.

And then he walked through the kitchen, his feet soft and soundless, and entered the livingroom, and found Mia balling some middle-aged dude he never saw before on the couch.

*** *** ***

Tara was simply in awe at just how fucked she was. She was stranded in some bumblefuck ghost town with a dead priest as her only companion. It was chilly, her coat was left inside the taxi--with her iPod! God!--and now her cell phone was dead. Oh my God, this was shit. Did Pris *plan* this? Was this a fucking joke? Did she have this all set up, even going so far as to have her wireless service--the witch was now using the company phone--shut off? Was this the kiss off, the final goodbye? Was there an A-bomb or pack of rabid blood drinkers headed this way? This was Night Of the Living Dead country. This place was giving her the creeps. And the partially-skeletal remains of a man of the cloth under the New York Times Living Section--*that* couldn't have been a good omen.

The witch stood by the road, unwilling to sit and soil her new dress. Not even a car. Fuck. Like, who would *drive* there? It was a goddamn abandoned water-bottling plant. And a priest--

Tara's body tensed as she saw something, an intangible, a conclusion, spark in front of her brown eyes.

“Oh fuck me, no...”

And she took off her heels and started running down the road, looking like an idiot.

*** *** ***

The party at the Rusty Nail Pub was nowhere near as elaborate or formal as the Gala at Casa de Clair de Lune the previous month. In fact, the atmosphere, *sans* the holiday decos, was like any after-work company get-together. People--okay, *vampires*--slapped each other on the back and told ribald stories, downed glasses of blood and generally had a raucous good time. Only Pris seemed to be uninfected by the merriment, though she only let it show in those few moments when she wasn't the center of attention, being accosted by one brown-noser or another. The petite vampire was dressed in a simply-cut long black knit dress with long sleeves and a hem line that went past her knees. It was weirdly conservative, and the style made her look shorter than she really was, but she felt uncomfortable dressing like a slut on Christmas (or a couple days before, as the case was).

Pris took advantage of a lull in a conversation to slip out of the crowd, take a seat by the back, and hold a fluted glass of plasma pensively to her lips. Type O Negative, by the smell of it.

"Hey Pris, you okay? You seem, like, out of it."

Ivan. She put up no resistance as he eased his incredibly-built frame into the chair beside her and dutifully took her in his arms.

"Is it that noticeable?" she asked flatly.

"It's like you're all *down* and stuff, man."

She turned and regarded her lion-maned companion with ice-blue eyes lightly lined with stress.

"It's just...my assistant totally blew off this party...and I'm just *pissed*, okay?" She took a sip from her glass, a sour expression on her face. "It's just not *right!*"

"Well, like--maybe she's running late and stuff."

"She's *always* first in line for free food and drink," the petite vampire snapped back, "If she isn't here by now, she never will be. And I look like an idiot. My own *assistant!* How does *that* make me look? And she didn't even call...it's so rude! After all I've done for her!"

“Maybe you should kill her,” Ivan helpfully offered.

Pris sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Not on *Christmas!*”

“Hey,” the big man said, his massive hand delicately taking her by her slim white wrist. “They’re starting to play George Michael. Let’s boogie.”

And at that moment, a single drop of water fell from somewhere on the ceiling onto the back of Pris’s alabaster hand, and as it fell, it took her skin off with it like dripping paint.

Then it began to rain.

*** *** ***

Gabriel said nothing as he witnessed the revolting tableau of some balding, bearded, somewhat paunchy man naked with Mia, pulling his rapidly-shrinking dick out of her and rolling on his side. The little vampire merely hissed like a cat and jumped on top of him and attempted to tear his throat out. At some point in the melee he realized that this bastard was a vampire as well, and it made him doubly-incensed.

“Gabriel,” Mia shouted, pulling on a white bathrobe. “*Stop it! Cut it out!*” Then she grabbed him by the collar and flung him to the other side of the room.

“Who is this...your *son*?” the middle-aged man asked, panting and rubbing his neck where only seconds ago ten little fingers were dug into it.

“You *fucker!*” screamed Gabriel, getting back on his feet and heading towards the man again in single-minded rage. “I’ll fucking rip your goddamn head off!”

The tall brown-haired woman caught him in mid-leap and wrestled him to the ground, folding the smaller vampire’s arms up in front of him and holding them against his chest with the weight of his own body.

“Come on, Gabe...calm down...”

“*How could you do fucking do this to me ?! What the hell--why?!*”

“Gabe...come on...let’s...let’s talk in the kitchen...”

She felt the hand of the man she just fucked pat her on the shoulder. He was already dressed.

“Everything...okay here?” he asked in a voice meant to sound authoritative and concerned, but ended up coming off as spoken by one who would rather not be involved. “You got it?”

“Yes, Orlen,” she said softly, never taking her eyes off the wild, pale blue ones of the small figure beneath her.

“Well...alright. *Call* me.”

After the older vampire left Mia wearily lifted herself off Gabriel and led him to the kitchen. Her first instinct was to heat up some water to make him some tea but she stopped herself by the time she lifted the saucepan out of the rack and almost laughed at the mistake. After all this time, and all her experiences as a vampire...it all came back down to habit. She turned back to the little vampire, who was perched shakily on the kitchen table, staring at her, his face limp in devastation and his eyes still shiny and wet.

“Oh, *Gabriel*,” she said sympathetically, taking a couple of steps closer to him. “I really wish...you would have called.”

And perhaps he had not tried hard enough with her.

“I...who the hell *was* that, Mia?” he asked, his voice serrated with emotion. “He...he was another *vampire*!”

“He’s...a *friend*. He works at Kennedy University. He’s a professor.”

The little vampire was suddenly only several inches in front of her, his pale blue eyes blazing and desperate.

“But we had a *bond*! I--if you want humans, fine, even Frank, it’s not the same thing! But another *vampire*...no! *No!* We have a bond...I...I let you drink out of my *heart*! So you could live!”

“And I’m *grateful* for that, Gabe...”

The woman’s voice faded out of his ears, faded out with a rush of atmosphere in his skull, as he looked upon the face of this...*person*...he thought he knew, this person who suddenly grew distant in his sight, was *something else*, looking upon him with...*pity*...(and maybe he just hadn’t tried enough with her...)

“I...I *love* you, Mia!” he heard himself say.

“Gabe...I care about you too...*like a brother*...I thought we had an understanding...”

“I thought so, too,” he interrupted bitterly.

“It’s just that...” she looked past the little vampire at the clock on the far side of the room. “I have to *live*, Gabe.” she looked at him in earnest, her eyes deep. “Don’t you see: I’ve been closeted up all these years and now I’ve got a chance and I want to live!”

“But...we *can* live--together! Forever!”

“Gabe...”

The little vampire grabbed the long hanging cuff of Mia’s white terrycloth bathrobe and tugged at it as if there was a place he wanted her to follow him to.

“But don’t you see,” he said with a jagged hopeful smile, “I finally *understand* now...I see it, understand it...I really love you. We have a bond, because I let you drink...”

“Gabriel--I don’t *want* to spend forever with you.”

“Why?” he asked in a small voice, squeezing the cuff in his hand a little tighter.

“Because I just--don’t want to. I don’t want to spend forever with *anyone*!”

“But...then you’ll be *all alone*.”

And she answered, (and was that the faintest trace of defiance, of a smirk, on her face?)

“No, I won’t.”

And suddenly the boy moved in a blur, reappeared in front of Mia with a steak knife, flipped it around, knocked her back against the sink, and shoved the long, thin wooden handle into her chest.

*** *** ***

By the time Tara finally managed to get back to Midtown Manhattan, it was almost four o’clock in the morning. She nearly had to give a Sunoco trucker

a blow job for the privilege of riding in his stinky cab up to Metro North, a notion she quickly disabused him of by briefly glamouring the fingers of her left hand into four snakes and a fuzzy caterpillar. At several points on her journey she had toyed with the idea of attempting to use her magick to fly, but the few attempts she made outside the barn and on the train platform barely brought her off the ground and appeared unstable. Besides, the witch decided that she should reserve her energy for anything she had to face when she was back in the City.

Because she was cold, exhausted, and had the very worst feeling--

Because Pris's plasma contact had always been in New Jersey--

Because the intersection between a priest and water, tanks of it, could only mean one thing--

And because that metal crow bar that was wedged through the two door handles of the Rusty Nail Pub, effectively locking it from the outside, locking everyone in--

And Tara, standing outside the Rusty Nail Pub on that bitterly cold night, the wind cutting through the velvet of her long red dress, in the heart of the City, breathing in the first gusts of a smell far more terrible than anything emitted by the priest's moldering corpse--

Everything in life boils down to decisions, even when there seems at first glance there seems to be no decision to be made.

The witch knew she was standing at the threshold of the Horror, and the threshold of the end of the life she knew. The full reveal had not been presented to her yet, but such events--the handful of clues she had notwithstanding--always seemed to transmit a terrible, psychic advance.

And she could always just turn around, walk out if the whole business now, spare herself the complication, blast it out of her memories with trifling distractions and drink, because she knew that was how she was going to deal with it anyway, whether she stepped in there or not.

But the curiosity drove her on, more than anything. Perhaps concern should have been the primary motivator, but she knew intuitively that the situation was well past the time where concern would have any effect or

meaning.

And *Pris*--

Tara hesitantly grasped one end of the crowbar--it was freezing to the touch, but she was surprised at how easily it slid out. And when she did so, the weight of dozens of vampire corpses--burned white and ashy, but fully dressed--fell past the doors and on top of her. The odor was of charred meat--but *bad* meat, as if someone had set a torch to rot. The witch smashed her palettes together in a seething, silent revulsion, but didn't scream, didn't make a fuss as she lay there on the icy sidewalk, the hairless, faceless light-grey husks of what she assumed were some of her coworkers pressing against her tall frame--pressing, but pressing lightly, for the meat and substance of them were gone, though their suits and dresses and even shoes remained intact in a grotesque display that reminded her of Mexican *calvarias*.

And though the corpses were not heavy, Tara felt overwhelmed, pinned, useless, caught in a foul embrace that froze her body and her thinking. She turned her head to either side, straining her neck, checking to see if anybody was out there, if anybody besides her was witnessing this, if anybody could validate that this was really happening and wasn't just another of her momentary reveries of the dead. But there was no one in that black shivering night, not a car, not a cop, not--

Do you hear it? The sound of its wheels--

A homeless person--whether it was man or woman, she could not tell--slowly appeared over the horizon of the sidewalk, a block or so away, the squeaky drone of the wheels of its shopping cart arriving long before It did. And the wait was unbearable, for the ragged person to arrive, and the smell eclipsed that of the corpses and the priest and anything else the witch might have brought to her memory. And as It approached, its black, swollen feet bound with string and wrapped in the remains of a pair of footwear unrecognizable but for a few eyelets and the floppy, detached lip of a rubber sole, Tara tried to attract its attention somehow. If It viewed and registered the House of Horrors scenario that lay motionless before the forest-green awning of the Rusty Nail Pub, It betrayed

no reaction. And the witch said in a hoarse, low, barely audible voice:

“Help. Help.”

But the individual never slowed down its already lumbering pace, and passed her by--

“Help.”

--which was just as well.

*** *** ***

Tara had gathered up those first bodies as if they were a bunch of Styrofoam mannequins--their clothes, strangely damp, weighed more than the bodies themselves--and dragged them into the pub, letting the doors swing shut behind her. The floor was completely covered in bodies--white, barely human forms shrouded in festive greens and reds--and there was no avoiding stepping on them, which the witch gingerly did in her red high-heeled shoes, every once in a while crushing a skull or bone in a cloud of powder. When she was a third into the space a few dribbles of water dropped down upon her head, skidding off her hair in the front and pouring down cool on her forehead and nose. The tall brunette immediately looked up, and saw a dribbly silver spigot from the sprinkler system--another drop got her right in the eye--

“Agh!”

It didn’t hurt, really, but it shocked and angered her and made her want to scream. But she didn’t scream. What was the *point*, when there was no one there to hear her? All those bodies, the garlands string over the lights, everything Dermaco had built and planned for over the last year--everything the witch did for Pris--*pointless*. Her heel accidentally stabbed through another skull, making a sound like the crushing of chalk. A *complete fucking waste*.

And how much was obvious, now? How much of the tale could be put together?

The walls and the tabletops and the clothing--wet. The sprinkler system. The priest. “Nature’s Breath Bottled Water.”

Holy Water.

This was a *hit*.

Tara giggled morbidly to herself, balancing her legs on the lumpy floor of Dermaco employees. *This*--this was bullshit. This wasn't even really happening. "Holy Water?" That was--that was just a myth, like a vampire's lack of reflection. The witch had no way of knowing that after the first drop seared the flesh of Pris's hand she screamed out, "Holy water! Run!" and that the idea, thus planted in the other, non-panicking vampires' minds, caused the fatal flaw in their comprehension of reality, how vampires--part magick themselves--were more susceptible to suggestion, and to the superstitions of the Past.

But what initially burned Pris?

*** *** ***

The body of Pris Baxter was just as charred white and unrecognizable as that of the others, but Tara intuitively knew that small corpse in the long black dress slumped over the table was her, knew it even though it was not the clothing the vampire would have normally wore. Carefully lifting up her head from the small puddle of water that had formed on the table's surface, the witch could almost make out the subtle curves of her cheeks, the line of her nose--though the eyes were gone, two small shallow dark-gray basins in their place.

And Tara reached consciously in her mind for the sadness, but the sadness wouldn't come, and she wondered if it would clobber her later. At the moment, all she could feel was a thundering, heavy finality, the closing of a door. And the thought--

The police--hell, the *FBI*--would have a hell of a time figuring this shit out. But one thing was for certain--if they didn't find evidence that Amanda Tarantino was one of the victims, she'd be first on their list of suspects. Because really--who would believe "vampire gang war?" Who would even believe *vampires*?

And the thoughts that ran through the witch's head--thoughts admittedly self-preserving and selfish--they temporarily numbed her emotions at their

source, *deadened* her, and she welcomed the deadening. And she pulled her dress up over her head and stood there in her underwear in the midst of the corpses of upwards of 60+ dead vampires and delicately removed Pris's dress and put it on herself and took her own red dress and put it on Pris--it suited Pris more, anyway. Then Tara took the ATM card and cash out of her own bag, stuffed them in her bra, grabbed the small white beaded clutch of her dead boss, glamourised into the petite, dark-haired blue eyed vampiress, and left the pub.

And then she suddenly re-entered the pub, walked awkwardly over all the bodies, grabbed Pris's black Manolos and put them on, put her own red shoes on the corpse's chalky, shriveled-up feet, and left the pub.

And that was it.

Door closed.

The ATM limit was merely \$300, but the witch, in the body of the late Pris Baxter, put her small cold white palm up to the glowing screen and *concentrated*, sending her magicks like squiggly microscopic gremlins to override the machine's program and empty as much money as she had coming to her, which--considering the tidy nest-egg she saved during her 9 months at Dermaco, plus bonuses for a "job well done"--was substantial. As she shoved the crisp green paper into the white beaded clutch bag it occurred to Tara; she probably could have used her abilities in a similar fashion with her disconnected cell-phone. Or maybe she still would have been too late. Or maybe even if she made it there, whoever did this to Pris--and the witch was fairly certain it was Clan Caress--would have attacked her. Then again, maybe the entire disaster could have been avoided. Only two things were, in those eerie minutes before dawn in the lobby of a Citibank, fairly certain to her. One, this machine was plumb out of cash, much like the other two next to it. And two: she was a freakin' idiot.

"I'm a freakin' idiot," Tara said disgustedly to Pris's reflection in the ATM screen, over the "This machine has temporarily run out of funds" blinking display. *This* was the pride of Kennedy College oh so many years ago? Sure, she gave Pris Dermaco on a silver platter--but maybe any gypsy worth her salt with a basic bit of voodoo could have done the same. And even if she was special, was

talented--what good did it do for the world other than expand her empire of chaos and make some rich people richer?

"I need to get the rest of the money," the witch said softly to herself, nodding.

Her plan, hastily concocted in the glare of The Rusty Nail Pub's overhead lights as she stood on Wes from R&D, was as follows: pack up everything and just *blow*. Having her clothes and ID amongst the corpses was a good start--and presumably Pris's face was being recorded by the bank's video cameras--but an investigation might track her and her fundage down anyway. Pris's money and cards were missing from her clutch, and Tara assumed that Caress had the bodies ransacked for money and valuables. It was best to just clean everything out now, and just become another mystery, as the vast majority of Dermaco had become on the floor and sprawled over furniture at the Rusty Nail. When the last dollar was drained out of her account, the woman known as Amanda Tarantino would be *dead*.

The sun started to rise, throwing the streets in which Tara--as Pris--walked in a preternatural glow. The City was still mostly abandoned, but a newspaper truck tossing a bundle at the drawn metal gate of a news kiosk seemed to herald in the new day. She had to find another bank fast and finish it up. A boy's voice suddenly called out to her,

"*Pris!*"

She turned around to see a thin, pale, sandy-blond teenager in a periwinkle hoodie, cradling a bloody hand, standing before her. He regarded her with a combination of relief and extreme emotional distress, as if he needed sleep, as if he was about to burst into tears. The cuts on his fingers and the palm of his hand were long and deep, and had bled brown over his clothes and on the tops of his sneakers.

"Uh--what?"

"I could *smell* you...looking for you...you weren't in the loft..."

Those long slashes in his hand, like the ones on Pris's face that day, that last day--

“G-Gabriel?” she asked uncertainly, pointing one of Paris’s long white fingers at him.

“Pris,” he choked, his face collapsing, “I don’t know what to do! *I don’t know what to do anymore...*”

“Gabriel, listen to me...” she released the glamour and now stood before him as the tall brunette with the somewhat shaggy brown pageboy haircut that she was. “...don’t go back to the loft anymore...it may not be *safe*...”

But at the sight of Tara’s true body morphing from that of his sister, Gabriel’s bloodshot pale blue eyes widened in insanity, his angel’s lips trembling into a terrible smile--he grabbed her wrist with his cold, strong hand--

“*You look just like her!*” he exclaimed. “You’ve come back!”

The witch tried to pull herself free from the boy’s vise-like grip, resorting to hitting his towheaded pate with his dead sister’s purse.

“*Yo!* Cut it out!”

“It’s *you*--I *knew* you’d come back--I knew it wasn’t strong enough to...”

“*Get--off* me!!”

The little vampire suddenly dropped her hand and stopped talking. The expression on his face was unspeakable, and it disturbed Tara worse than the entire Pub full of dead undead she had just left a couple of hours before. It was like...somehow...the boy *understood*. He understood, for real this time. And before his eyes the world sizzled out.

“Uh, *look*, kid,” the witch said warily, putting her arms up in front of her defensively and talking a couple of steps back on wobbly too-small Manolos. “I’m a friend of your sister’s and...and there’s been a really bad...*accident*...”

“You look just like her,” the boy said in wonder under his breath, the first rays of the sun hitting his pale, tear-stained face. “It’s...it’s kind of *funny* isn’t it? And yet--you’re *not* her, are you?”

The tall brunette shook her head.

“And my sister is dead, isn’t she?”

“Geez, look--I don’t know what to say...I’m really sorry for your loss...”

“That’s so funny,” Gabriel murmured like he was drunk or under some sort

of spell, slowly, with the faintest grin on his face. "Because you look just like her..."

Tara looked at the boy in bewilderment, her cheeks and mouth drawn with exhaustion.

"Who? Who are you talking about?"

"Mia Cefalu," he said breathlessly, every syllable crisply enunciated, the voice of this boy sucking all the oxygen & sight from the witch's perception.

"*Impossible*," she heard herself say as she blacked out.

*** *** ***

Gabriel returned to the midtown apartment of his last victim, his movements limp and his mind as if in a dream, as if he was walking through cotton candy. The door was unlocked, as he left it, and he brought a small package and a couple of newspapers that were waiting for her inside with him. He had shut off the heat before he left and turned on the air conditioner, so the body's decomposition, in the chill of late December, would be retarded *somewhat*--but judging by the smell, not that much. The smell never really bothered him though--it was just a concentrated version of his own scent. It was like home to him, the home of the denizens of the Second Life, *Thantatos Universal*. He knelt beside her bed and looked under the mattress at the white bundle he had placed there, at the faceless head.

Yes, he killed Mia. He killed her, though perhaps he really should have let her explain. He killed her, though he really loved her, and he thought that the killing might end it--those uncomfortable feelings--but it didn't.

And he was done crying.

And he was done replaying those final seconds in his mind, as he was on top of her, ignoring the pain of the blade cutting his fingers as he drove that wooden handle in her heart, and how she looked at him, then looked past him, how *big* her eyes were, how much those eyes said, and how quick it all was. And how she didn't even have a chance to say anything to him, it was all so *fast*.

And maybe he didn't try hard enough with her.

He was done crying over it, it was unseemly to cry over it. It wasn't what a *man* would do.

The little vampire crawled under the bed next to the white bundle and hibernated until late the next night. Then he woke up, took a long bath, dressed in his white t-shirt and jeans, walked in his bare feet down the hall to the elevator, went to the roof, rested his body upon a recliner, and waited for the sun to come up.

HEROES

Joshua Brundage never found out what happened to his two children. Had he did, he might have expressed some regret at not being able to perform the deed himself—not out of disgust and hatred for what they had become, but because it was his *duty*. But hell, his duty was to bring them down—put them down just like all the others of their kind—before they ever harmed another human. And he failed miserably, and he knew it.

The 5th Avenue shoppers who clogged the sidewalks and spilled out into the streets on that Christmas Eve either avoided or ignored the big, broad-shouldered older gentleman with the unkempt blond/white hair and the wrinkled dark wool overcoat—avoided most probably because he looked lost, drunk, and had an odor, and ignored because he didn’t have that air about him of being a person that was going places in the world, and in the City that rendered one transparent.

Of course, Joshua Brundage had been quietly, industriously protecting the City from the Undead scourge for some time now, ever since he tracked his wayward children to there more than ten years ago. But the general populace did not believe in the existence of vampires, did not believe in it one bit unless they themselves were bit or maimed or turned—at which point their usefulness and standing as a member of the general populace had been greatly, irrevocably altered. In fact, had he been caught in the act of staking or decapitating or burning, it was a given that he’d be hauled in for murder in the first degree; so he made it his business not to be.

But it did seem rather Godless, the spot he was in, though he tried to keep up his Bible readings the best he could, and catch the Reverend Rudolph S. White’s Blood Of The Lamb Hour on his static-ridden old Zenith. He was caught in a number of what psychologists refer to as “binds”—a paradoxical, seemingly irrational situation from which there appears to be no escape. For example, he risked his life every day to fight a foe that nobody believed in. He believed in

them, the Vampires, and so, having been introduced to the concept, it was his duty to eradicate them and protect his fellow humans from their needlelike alabaster fangs. However, the humans, having no belief in the creatures, could not appreciate the sacrifice that he had to make, and so looked down on the man as an alcoholic, a transient, a bum. And it wasn't even that he was acting in the role of Hunter to garner said appreciation—to do so for that tawdry reason would have made him a hypocrite, and negated all the good he sought to accomplish. But a little approbation for his works might have made him a hair more mentally stable than he was presently, and that was simply a fact.

Another bind Joshua struggled with on a daily—sometimes hourly—basis was the situation with Priscilla and Gabriel. The thought that his own seed could have been perverted into those...vile...*beings!* It was a continual horror for him. And it wasn't just the fact of their vampirism, their murder and drainage of innocent human beings. It was...the whole vampire culture. He had seen enough of it to know what a moral and ethical cesspool it was in every respect. He knew that vampires had no barriers. He realized that the possibility of both of his children not only having sex of every stripe in every way with every kind of person—including each other, which he could have killed them for alone—was almost certain. And yet, no matter how perfectly he had one or the other in his crosshairs, no matter how sweet a shot was available to him, he just couldn't do it.

God's Army had no margin for sentiment.

*** *** ***

After going through the same bullshit he went through when Myra was killed—3rd degree, polygraph, the ransacking of his home, and being treated and looked at as if he was a total murderous scumbag—Frank Cefalu was allowed to pack a couple of things from his house, which was now taped off as a crime scene, and find some other place to stay for a while, as long as it was not out of state. Enter Billy Richard Rooke.

“Shit, man...I don’t know what to say.”

The short blond man in the gray wife-beater and black sweats opened the door of his Bensonhurst apartment to find his partner looking like death itself, the grief, stress, and lack of sleep having drained the usual olive of his complexion and lightening it to ash. Billy Richard, whose only experience with death outside of his profession was in regards to his father (and it was hardly a tragedy for him), was unsure of how to proceed with Frank—it felt like holding a baby in your arms when you don’t know what you’re doing, worrying that you might dent it or drop it or break it. He also didn’t want to appear *faggy*.

“S’alright,” the taller man said in a hoarse voice. “I just...” Tears began to swell in his dark, slightly almond-shaped eyes. “*Oh, God, I still can’t believe it...*”

Well, fagginess be damned, Billy Richard thought, taking his friend in his arms, bracing himself against his size. He felt Frank’s hand grip his bare shoulders for support.

“Man, it’s gonna be okay,” the blond man said, patting his back. “I know...”

“She’s dead,” Frank wailed through his phlegm-filled throat. “It’s fuckin’...on fuckin’ *Christmas!*” He breathed back a torrent of mucus, his mouth drawn at the corners and his lips trembling. “Who does that? At Christmas time? Mia—oh God!”

“There’s some sick fucks out there.”

“Oh, God! She’s dead!”

And so on.

Rooke’s apartment was a small but tidy affair, the only distinguishing feature of it being an entire gym in the middle of his living room. He had a weight bench, Bow-Flex, exercise bike, and various barbells and springy instruments. Being of small stature, and of a body type prone to going to shit if not relentlessly worked upon, the man with the blond crew-cut had turned his fitness goals into the centerpiece of his life, and had two rock-hard biceps and a tight waist to show for it. Of course, Frank achieved these things without even trying, putting a couple of hours at Bally’s a week maximum if ever. Billy Richard always envied his partner’s ability to not care, and thought that he had the ideal life—and, deep

in the pits of his psyche, found Frank's increasing difficulties with his wife, the death of his mistress, and now the present tragedy to be some sort of validation that his *own* life wasn't that bad...something he felt a degree of guilt about.

Billy Richard poured out a mug of coffee for his friend.

"So did they clear you?"

"Yes and no."

"*Shit.*"

"Yeah. They never *really* clear you, anyways." Frank stared through the gym equipment at the dormant TV screen and his convex reflection in its gray-blackness. "A girlfriend and a wife dead within one year of each other. What would *you* think?"

"That you got enemies," Billy replied, handing the steaming cup to Frank and sitting across from him on the edge of the brown weight-bench.

"Well...sometimes I think *God* is my enemy."

Billy Richard looked away from Frank uncomfortably.

"Aw, don't talk like that, man..."

"No, Rich, I mean, *look*: who has fuckin' bad luck like this, Rich? *Who?*"

"The Kennedys?"

"But they *wanted* to be somebody—I never wanted to be nobody." The olive-skinned man's hand shook as he brought the cup up to his fleshy lips. "And...things have been fucked for a while. This is just the other shoe dropping..." He regarded Billy Richard with a sorrowful earnestness, placing his other hand on the cup to hold it steady. "...not that I'm trying to make light of all this."

"I know you're not, Frank, I know you're not." The short blond man picked up a barbell mindlessly and started to do curls. "You were telling me, Mia...had *problems*."

"She did...yes, she did. I don't suppose I made it any easier on her. But I didn't think...she'd react the way she did. I understand that women get emotional, but...Mia always seemed to take things *harder* than other folks. And the last year..." Frank's face grew dark. "...it was like the Twilight Zone. I can't even explain to you why. I can barely understand it myself. But it was like living with a

complete stranger, though she did all those things that wives do. Like I said, I can't explain it. Do you know I'm on medication, Rich?" But he was no longer speaking to his partner anymore. He was speaking to some silver sliver of a spot that shone on the chrome finish of the exercise bike. To talk about it—in the shadow of his wife's death—it begged dissociation. "My doctor, he can't understand it, why I feel like I do. How I feel...like my entire reality is coming apart. I've been feeling that for a while. And nobody understood what I meant. That feeling...of your wife kissing you—but the kiss is—somehow—like an *alien*. Worse than a stranger. Like an alien." His voice became rough with emotion. "But I think I know why. I think I know now. Shit." He buried his face in his left hand. "Fuck!"

Billy Richard felt for the guy, but all this talk about abstractions...and, and *aliens*...it was making him antsy. This wasn't Frank. If Frank was going through all this stuff, he never let on.

"Do they have any suspects?" the blond man asked, still doing the curls, the muscles on his biceps shuddering.

"Besides me? No...they're going through some past busts I've made, seeing if maybe I pissed off some mob guy or something. But I think I know who did it."

Billy Richard stopped curling.

"Who?"

The corner of Frank's mouth twitched as he pulled some folded papers out of his jacket and handed them to his partner without a word. They were on buff stationary with the Kennedy College Dept. Of English letterhead, hand-written in a heavy, slanted cursive. The top sheet read,

Mia!

What can I say about the chapters you have seen fit to so graciously entrust with me? You are quite a talent, my dear! A diamond in the rough! The part with the car accident was both moving and original, and I admit—I was nearly in tears. Great use of magical realism!

I felt as if I was reading Garcia Marquez. That you so much again for the privilege of being the first to read it!

I admit—I simply cannot stop thinking of the gentle falls of your beautiful, round breasts! So natural! And your tasty nipples—brown like strawberries dipped in chocolate! I look forward to plumbing you depths with the full measure of my trusty servant! I want to hear you scream in pleasure!

To think that in the barrens of this prefabricated Disneyland I would have had the supreme fortune and charmed luck as to find someone in the same life situation as I! Your fresh perspective on our condition has infused this too-long life with a new energy! I look forward to exploring further with you.

Have you read the Foucault yet?

I look forward to once again being immersed in the sweet, salty juices of your Dead Sea.

All the best!

-OW

Upon finishing the letter the short, muscular man's blue eyes immediately swung back to the haggard visage of his partner.

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“This guy's a freak.”

“Yeah.”

“Do the boys know...”

“No,” Frank answered bluntly.

Billy Richard's blue eyes rolled thoughtfully in his head as if calculating some sort of figure.

“Um...maybe the boys should know about this, Frank.”

“No. Would only give them more of a reason to think I killed her. The jealous husband. They just wouldn’t understand. This feeling that I have.”

“But Frank...” the blond man replied, looking mournfully at his partner.
“...maybe he was just fuckin’ her...”

“He wasn’t just fuckin’ her!” Frank yelled back, jumping to his feet, coffee spilling out of the cup as he wrapped his fingers around it tight like a fist. “You said it yourself! The man’s a *freak!* You didn’t read all the letters, Rich! It’s all there! He talks about...blood, hunting. ‘Hunting humans’ that’s exactly what he wrote! And I don’t know, maybe that’s all high-faluting intellectual bullshit but it sounds pretty *fucked* to me, especially since *my wife is fuckin’ dead! She fuckin’ dead!* And I *know* this *asshole* did it!” His face softened briefly as he remembered his wife. “And I know my Mia—I know she didn’t fall for it. I know at some point she didn’t fall for it anymore—but this sick fuck wouldn’t leave her alone. And so he broke in, and, and...put a fucking knife-handle through her heart! Who in God’s name does that? Why do it—because it’ll *hurt* more that way?! My Mia, no, she tried to get out. She saw he was getting weird and she was trying to get out...”

Billy Richard Rooke had a mind that was inscrutable, like an animal’s. His thoughts and choices operated by their own rules, no explanations offered or necessary. And when he first heard about Mia getting murdered, he *did* think that his partner was somehow involved. And he didn’t think that because he didn’t like Frank or thought poorly of him somehow. Frankly, from what he heard, Mia was a big problem. And he always figured the bitch killed Frank’s mistress, though of course he never said anything about it. Mia was crazy. And his partner was better off without her. But. The scenario with her lover offing her sounded kind of plausible, too. Okay, maybe it didn’t sound *that* plausible. But Billy Richard trusted Frank. Frank was a good guy. Frank was a good soldier, out in the field, and always covered Billy Richard’s back. Frank and him had an understanding. Frank and him were *warriors*.

Billy Richard put down his barbell and looked directly in Frank’s eyes.

“Frank, I know why you didn’t want them to know. Because you wanted

that information for yourself. *Because you wanted to go kill him yourself.* And I understand it. And I want to help you do it. I want to help you do it because that's what *brothers* do. But first we're going to have to do some coke."

*** *** ***

Joshua always felt more comfortable in the dark, and he damned himself for that because he had fallen into his own enemy's living pattern. He slunk confidently amongst the cast shadows of skyscrapers and the foreboding pitch-black alleys, away from the eyes of the general populace who he assumed scorned him. Even the Christian holiday made him feel uneasy, at least in the daytime. And he found that Christmas Eve, drifting amongst the last-minute shoppers and the sightseers, to be pretty damn near unbearable. It was unbearable because he had realized that he didn't feel quite human anymore—or if he did feel human, it was with a depth and peculiarity of feeling that average people couldn't relate to. And looking at all those families with children, many obviously tourists—he was reminded of how he never got to take Gabriel and Priscilla out to New York like he promised. And now they were there anyhow.

He hated this city. He liked the dark because it afforded him the opportunity to see less of it. And the only reason he stayed—the only reason, including defending humans (because he could have done that anywhere—God knows they could have used more like him back in Spokane)—was because one day he was sure he would be able to give his two children the rest that they deserved. And he knew on some level that by making such a pact he effectively doomed himself to this city forever.

A *bind*, they called it.

His ice-blue eyes sighted a suspicious couple just beyond Empire State, by a row of demolished buildings. It was disorienting—only a couple of weeks ago he knew this block to have a Roy Rogers, two catch-all tourist shops, and a deli. Only the camera store on the corner at the end of the block remained, along with three floors of apartments above it; the ghost of its former neighbor still etched to its side in mortar and scars of brick. At night he depended on such "landmarks" of

the cityscape as a familiar set of gated-up stores to find his way, bullet-points on the monotonous landscape that would provide a counterpoint to the sense of dislocation he felt. But the missing buildings affected him deeper than that. He didn't know quite why. Roy Rogers sucked.

The art of distinguishing a street vampire from a homeless person from a drug addict from a prostitute from the merely dislocated was a tricky one. It was easier to do in the colder months because the Vampire never appeared cold, never shivered, and often would eschew such climate-appropriate sartorial implements as a coat. And such was the case with the rail-thin man and woman whose feet soundlessly traversed the rubble-strewn crater of one of the demolished buildings, where a series of large cardboard boxes, connected by a plastic sheet over their tops like a roof, awaited them. The male looked to be in his late 30s or early 40s (as if such temporal designations told anything about these creatures) and had dark, choppy hair and a beard; his companion appeared much younger, late teens tops, with a blue patterned scarf tied around her hair like a gypsy, soft tendrils of brown escaping and blowing around her sallow face as the shrill December wind blew. Both wore the type of loose, nondescript clothing—T-shirts and ill-fitting pants—that one might find on Westernized villagers of a poor Third World nation, completely inappropriate for the keening cold that made even Joshua uncomfortable under his somber woolen coat. But their garments weren't the only tip-off.

There was also the matter of the squirming sack the woman was carrying.

The Hunter had an agility and an uncanny ability to make himself scarce, small, unnoticeable that was quite impressive and unexpected for a man of his stature. By the time the vampires were almost at the threshold of this paper-and-plastic shanty Joshua was only about 15 feet away, crouching behind a metal dumpster filled with jagged sheets of broken glass and splintery remnants of window frames, of which he had taken the liberty of securing several on his person and one in his hand. He watched in revulsion, his blue eyes blazing in the light of some street lamps beyond, as, once the pair was nested, the female took a naked fidgeting baby out of her bag and began to lick its forehead. Her *tongue*—

it was so long, so prehensile, and the *teeth*, you could see them—

*** *** ***

Professor Orlen West caught the “bug,” as he liked to refer to it, on sabbatical in England in the summertime in a piss-stained alleyway from an Eastern-European whore named “Stardust”—and, he would tell you, it was the *only* way to get it. He was conducting an extensive tour of the UK at the time so that he might gather the requisite materials, personal accounts, and “atmosphere” necessary to complete his latest book, a pseudo-biography of the great poet, Aleister Crowley. He knew that the standard academic approach to the recounting of a life was woefully insufficient to depict properly the manifold-textured life and times of the Great Beast, and so he decided to envelop it within the maxi-potential coating of the Fantastic—only in the Fantastic, the full measure of the man and the essence of the Case could be revealed in its broadest wingspan.

And, to get in the proper mindset, he fucked a lot of whores.

But you see, that was the problem Professor West had with the Judeo-Christian Western monopoly on the defining of terms and the delineation of propriety—the word “whore,” for example. Orlen never thought of them as “whores,” as the Society of Repression defined the term. They were not whores—they were merely women of a sexuality fully liberated from hegemonic constraints. And the word “vampire,” for that matter—to take the blood of another inside your body, that was on the order of the holiest of sacraments one could perform, and a blessing for the donor as well. If the fangs and physiology has been shaped for such a purpose, where is the sin in it? And who *defines* “sin,” anyway? And who defines “vampires”? And isn’t the act of defining in itself a prejudicial act?

Orlen stepped out of his shower and began sensuously buffing himself with an emerald-green towel, letting out quick, throaty moans of pleasure whenever the rough cloth made contact with his penis. His gut, covered in a field

of squiggly salt-and-pepper hair, hung over his flaccid member like a mantelpiece, and was held up by two furry bovine legs that were thick on top and dwindled down to popsicle sticks at the calves. Strands of his too-black hair from the back and the left side were splayed in confusion about his freckled bald scalp, and the creeping white that his turning arrived too late to halt was evident at his temples, in the depths of his ears, and on the hair around his thick, salmon-colored lips. His was not an ideal physical specimen of a corpus, but it had that Bacchus-on-a-donkey quality which, combined with an urbane wit and bohemian air of intellectual and cultural sophistication, drove the young chickies in his classes wild.

And the vampirism only added to the appeal, made him even more beautiful in these young women's minds, even though the fact of it was not consciously comprehended (unless he wished it to be, with very specific goals in mind)—and how could something so beautiful and wondrous as the Gift be bad, be unfit for existence on this blue-green marble?

Orlen's house on the far side of Shore's End was far too big for one man, his prodigious collection of books, art reproductions, and potted plants notwithstanding. He had shared it with his wife for 15 years, and it was a good thing she left him when she did, because, especially in the light of his "bug," he most assuredly would have had to kill her. If he had his aversion to the concept of monogamy (unnatural!) And marriage (a medieval legal contract) before the Second Life, now it was not even worthy of the debate. Which was why he found Mia Cefalu's bizarre insistence on co-existence with her husband so puzzling. She said it was in order to keep up appearances in the community—to have a "cover" under which to operate. Even if he would be able to consider a prefab shithole like Shore's End worthy of such a masquerade, why not live the life of a merry widow? Was she holding out for the weekly paycheck? Surely life-insurance and a policeman's death benefits could tide her over for a while. Why have such an embarrassing reminder of the banality of one's former existence around? Why kow-tow to the asphyxiating structures of polite society when one was as near a god as ever walked this Earth?

Mia—it was such good fortune to run into her at the Blockbuster that day. They sensed each other's vampiric natures almost immediately. He introduced himself as a Professor of English at Kennedy University, and she expressed her life-long desire to write a novel. It was only natural that he school her in the task. And while the work itself was no more than a glorified comic book or soap-opera with passages and ideas that he found damn near incomprehensible—as well as a particularly buffoonish character that he had the paranoid feeling was based on himself, which of course was impossible, because surely she couldn't be such a two-faced bitch—there were certain scenes of a carnal nature that he was almost positive were nothing more than broadcasts of the lust she had for him. And so it went.

And then that odd scene with the boy the other day—he hoped that turned out all right.

The bearded man ran his thick palm over the corpulent, hairy front of his nude body in the luxurious manner of a cat, then pulled on a black bathrobe, filled a spray bottle with water, and set out to begin the early-evening schpritzing of his beloved collection of ferns and succulents. The sound of a knock made him pause before a print of Blake's "The Great Red Dragon And The Woman Clothed With The Sun" and stare down the hall at the curtained front door quizzically. He rubbed his beard with his free hand. Now who in *blazes* could that be? He hadn't been expecting anyone. But perhaps it was Mia, Orlen thought with a reminiscing smile as he headed for the entrance—her, or another of those delightful Girl Scouts.

What he found instead, to his dismay and great disappointment, were two masked men with handguns.

Orlen stood speechless in the doorway, the squeegee still in his hand and pointed uselessly at the facing weapons. It was rather a Mutt and Jeff combination, both dressed completely in black and wearing dime-store domino masks; the taller one had a NY Yankees baseball cap, and the shorter one wore a red bandanna in his hair.

"I suggest you get *inside*, fuck-bag," hissed Red Bandanna, "before I turn

your face to pizza!"

Well this *was* something, Orlen thought, allowing himself to be pushed back inside his house by the pair, Yankee Cap hastening to fasten all the locks while Red Bandanna kept his weapon closely trained on the bearded man. He supposed he could have used his vampire abilities to take them out right there upon the welcome mat, but he feared that taking a bullet or several in his face might be disfiguring; vampires recovered very well, but they did not exactly *regenerate*. A bit of distraction would be necessary—some distraction, and then perhaps an unexpected *feast*—

"I assure you, if money is what you're looking for—I only make a teacher's salary. I have some rare books, if you want, but I hasten to mention that they might be of authors you've never heard of..."

"Shut the fuck up, you...*freak*," yelled Red Bandanna, shaking his gun. Yankee Cap stood a little apart from the scene, still by the door, staring queerly at Orlen. Red Bandanna called out to his partner, never leaving his indistinguishable mask-eyes from his target. "He's all yours, man. He's all yours. *Finish him! Finish him!*"

Yankee Cap answered by slumping slightly against the door like an unstrung doll, both hands holding the gun that hung limply by his groin area. He shook his head as if dizzy.

"Aw *come on*, buddy! Don't pass out now! Your *wife*, man! Your wife..."

So *that* was it, then, Orlen mused. Some cuckold. He wondered which one it could have been.

"I assure you, I have never been untoward..."

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" howled Red Bandanna, raising his weapon up to Orlen's face. "Just *shut*...the fuck up! Fuck-bag!"

"Young man," the professor in the bathrobe intoned in a mellifluous, paternal voice, his arms up and to the sides, taking a tentative step towards his would-be attacker. "I know in life we have many stressors, many burdens, and sometimes it all seems so insurmountable and overwhelming. Often I have been in a frame of mind much as you now possess—and had I only a weapon! Yes! I

too might take a temporary leave of my senses. It's natural. It happens to all of us. But in those moments there is something I turn to, and it gives me solace..." Orlen's bushy eyebrows bent sympathetically as a beatific, narrow smile stretched apart his hairy cheeks. "Son, has anyone ever talked to you about Jesus Chr..."

"Fuck you, Daddy!"

And with that Red Bandanna let a round fly right in the center of Orlen's face, blasting off his nose and part of his upper palette.

For a minute or so, all three men stood wordlessly, the smell of gunpowder and seared aged meat thick in the air between them; Red Bandanna's arms were frozen in the position in which he fired, Yankee Cap remained leaning against the door, and Orlen, still holding the squeegee, stood wide-eyed, bleeding profusely from the middle of his noseless face. The bearded man's lower jaw, covered in red, moved slightly, first up and down, then side to side, as if he was almost about to speak. Finally he broke the silence by squeaking out a:

"Ah...rrrahr..."

"Oh, shit," Red Bandanna said under his breath. The next second, Orlen was upon him, sinking what remained of his fangs deep within his neck.

"Frankkkkk," Billy Richard screamed, dropping his gun in panic and trying desperately to pull the larger man off of his body, *"Frank! Shoot him! Oh, for God's sake, Frank...aiee!!!!"*

Frank Cefalu snapped out of what seemed like a missing four hours and pulled his arms out and ramrod-straight, carefully aiming his barrel and pulling the trigger. The first shot clipped Orlen at the top of his skull, forcing him to drop his hold on Billy Richard and stumble back; then, with an open field, Frank emptied the rest of his gun into his chest, blasting the bearded man's robe open, exposing his nudity, gore raining down his torso and onto the floor in torrents. But yet the man wouldn't go down, he merely roared and continued forward—

"Fuck!" Rich shouted out weakly on the floor, his hand clutched to his spurting wound and claret spilling through his fingers. "It's like this guy's on PCP

or something!"

And at his partner's words Frank—who appeared at that moment to have something of an epiphany—ceased fumbling in his jacket for another round, pushed a lamp off a small table that stood beside him, grabbed the piece of furniture and ran with it legs-first into the body of Orlen West, shoving him into the bookshelf behind him. The tall man leaned into the flat hard surface of the table, staring in satisfaction at his rival's ruined, now motionless head. Then he stepped back, viewed from a distance what he had done (for at such close quarters, in the thick of it, it hardly registered), and said, pointing at the impaled body,

"That man—was a *vampire*."

Then Frank put his arm down and turned to Billy Richard with the expression of a grave child.

"My *wife*—was a vampire. And...and *you*..."

The man on the ground laughed nervously, then hysterically.

*** * * * *

Joshua Brundage held the female vampire's head at bay by her throat, ignoring the futile champing of her jaws as he shoved a long, jagged shard of wood into her mate's back. At the foot of the scuffle, atop a bed of dirt and pulverized concrete, was the baby that only minutes ago was being licked upon its soft, bald head by the Undead; the child, presumably terrified by his near-devouring, and, in a far more general sense, the separation from his parents, yelped with its wet pink mouth into the night. There was deliberate hastiness about the Hunter's motions, as he pushed the freshly-destroyed vampire's body away from him and set to work against the other. She clawed and hissed at him like a wild animal, a ferocity that belied her young, almost sweet exterior; but though possessing a strength and agility surpassing that of humans, she was no match for the big man, who was still muscular for his age, still a soldier.

And when she was dead—truly dead, her tortured soul, with the dissolution

of her body, finally at peace—the tall, nearly white-haired man gingerly picked up the crying infant, and tucked him under the wool of his coat for warmth, holding the mewling babe against his chest. And the child, once bundled, grew quiet and looked upon the man with large, wet, almost inquisitive dark eyes. Despite the horror that the Hunter had just witnessed and had been a party to, he could not help but crinkle his ice-blue eyes within his heavily-lined face at the sight. The baby was freezing, but Joshua figured the body heat and the coat would keep him right until he reached help. As if on cue, ice-crystals began to float down dreamily, gently landing upon the rubble-strewn floor of the site and melting on contact with the man's head and clothing. It wasn't a burdensome turn of the weather, it wasn't oppressive—it was as if God Himself had cast from Heaven a layer of fresh, untainted natural beauty to begin the process of covering up, if only for a few days, the ugliness.

And it was all part of the Natural Order Of Things, wasn't it—the promise made by God that eventually all things would be cleaned out, the chaff sorted from the wheat, and beginning Anew. Soon, all over the City, a sheet of snow and ice would cover the streets and buildings, water seeping into cracks only to expand and contract, expand and contract as the temperature shifted, it seemed, by whim—and with the contracting and expanding came the Undermining of Structure, the Weakening of Foundations, and soon the Ugliness would crumble. Joshua's great frustration was that it seemed for every step forward he took in the eradication of the Vampire, five steps backward in the form of Infection erased the achievement. But maybe there was a *promise*, a promise by God, that eventually the Ugliness and Evil would be once and for all swept away—if not by the futile and limited hand of man, then by the intervention of the Divine.

The child's tiny hand, delicately cushioned with a thin layer of fat, reached out and touched the large man's leathery chin.

"Poor little darlin'—you're cold, I know. But soon we'll getcha someplace nice. Maybe even find your Mom and Dad—I promise, I'll try."

And the baby leaned in towards the folds of the Hunter's neck and stuck his teeth into them.

*** *** ***

Frank Cefalu and Billy Richard Rooke lay on the floor of Professor Orlen West's living room, heads propped up by cushions, in a purgatorial state between really exhausted and narcotically aroused. Frank's hat was off and his black domino mask was pushed up into his hair, between the dark wavy locks shiny with sweat. Richard had lost his bandanna and mask along the way when his partner dragged him into the kitchen for some impromptu cauterizing with a heated butter knife. After the necessary wound preparations were made the two raided Orlen's vinyl collection, and presently "Rocky Raccoon" was being etched out by the turntable. The body of the late professor remained in the distance, still propped up against the bookshelf, the table he was impaled on covering his dense mid-section like a wooden chest-plate, overturned volumes scattered at his feet.

"So...what are we going to do about *Chuckles* over there," Billy Richard asked, the broad Casablanca-brand ceiling fan rippling in his vision.

"Not now," Frank replied with a tired edge to his voice, shaking his head.

"If not now—when?"

"Look—I really need...to *chill* right now. Because I'm one marble away from Bellevue at the moment."

"Ah, you're gonna be *fine*...you're not going to go crazy. I *know* you. You're not going to go crazy. People *choose* to go crazy, it don't just happen. And you're too good for that."

Frank pulled off his mask and held it out in front of his face, squinting through the diminished vision at the other end of the eye-holes.

"And how are *you* doing?"

"What do you mean, how am *I* doing," the blond man asked defensively. "I'm doing *fine*. Absolutely *fine*."

"You don't feel *sick*, or nothing?"

"What? Because of the bite? C'mon, I feel *fine*. That Rambo shit just

burned the motherfucker out of my system.”

The dark-haired man put the mask down on his chest and remained silent. Billy Richard scuttled up on his elbow to a sitting position and continued talking.

“Frank? What are you thinking now? That I’m going to turn into Bela Lugosi and go flapping through the window?” He flashed his friend a strained wise-guy grin. “What, you actually *believe* this stuff? Frank—the guy was probably on PCP or something—I heard of guys, so hopped up, can take a shotgun blast straight through the chest and still keep coming. And yeah, anybody with a fucking *table* shoved into their vitals—they’re going down. Vampires...you never used to *be* like this, Frank. This, you never used to *be* like.”

“I lived with her all that time and I didn’t know,” Frank spoke to the air, to the spectre he could see beyond it. “She was like that for, what, a year almost—and I didn’t see it. But I guess—I guess I kind of knew. I just didn’t have a name for what was happening.”

“Ah, women are just fucking *nuts*, that’s all—you don’t need any fancy explanations for that. They’re all fucking hormonal. Take the girl I was just seeing. Invites me to lunch one day, asks me about my ‘plans.’ Plans. Like I was going to *marry* her or something—like I was going to marry her with *that* attitude. Like I need a motherfucking interrogation about my life.” Billy Richard stopped to scratch the red, inflamed skin around his bandaged wound. “I’m like: you gonna love me, then *love* me, then. Take me the way I am or get the fuck out.” He turned and looked behind him uncomfortably at the dead man’s darkening feet at the other end of the room. “So uh, about Chuckles...”

Frank let out a long sigh, still looking at the Ghost.

“Yeah,” he answered, distracted.

“So we cut him up, then.”

Frank, again roused from the comfort of trance, the land he had spent so much time in for so many months, sat up and stared in disbelief at his partner, the domino mask falling to the floor.

“*That’s* your plan, huh? Just cut him up?”

“It’s the safest way. Cut him up into cubes. Smash his bones.”

“Jesus, you’re morbid.”

“I’m not the one impaling people on furniture, Frank.”

“Oh, *fuck...*” Frank ran his fingers through his limp hair in anxiety, the reality of the night, of the last several days, starting to hit him hard.

“No, *listen* to me, Frank—don’t freak out again. Just listen. I know a place we can sledgehammer the bones, then bury the whole thing, nobody will ever know.”

“How do you know this?”

“Know what?”

“How do you know all this, where to bury a body, all this?”

“I’m a cop, Frank.”

Frank pulled himself to his feet.

“Forget it,” he said in resignation, his voice wavering. “I don’t want to know. Let’s just do it.” Without even waiting for his partner the tall man approached the body of Orlen, braced himself by stepping on the man’s feet, and pulled the table out of his chest, the impact almost knocking them both over. But the body remained standing, leaning against the bookshelf, a river of putrid red-black ooze falling in spurts and chunks from the massive torso wound. Frank couldn’t help but stare at the pale, swollen, ruined body—the body of the man who wrote love notes to his wife and fucked her and presumably killed her—and lose himself in the Horror, the Reality. *This*—this was reality, a reality of a deeper and realer nature than even the most gruesome of sights his profession provided. He heard a voice inside his head say, “Look upon this and *laugh*—try to laugh, if you can.”

And behind him Billy Richard said,

“Frank...I—I’m not feeling too good, Frank...”

*** *** ***

The babe champed its jaws through the tough old flesh until he reached an artery, then bathed his tiny tongue and throat in the warm spill. The big man,

in shock, grabbed the baby roughly by his squishy torso and attempted to pull him off his already profusely bleeding neck, blood splattering to the lightly snow-covered ground, but the little one hung on tight, and the effect was like opening a zipper, from ear-to-ear.

The Hunter fell soon after, dropping and almost crushing the child in the process. The tearing of a throat—it happens so fast, and produces no more a thoughtful look on the victim as would an elk suddenly seized upon by a tiger would do. And the babe—he was not hurt in the fall, no worse for wear by the experience, other than that he realized that the big people who were taking care of him since he had consciousness were dead. But he was not helpless. He would learn. And when he had finished having his fill of the lovely warm red liquid that surrounded in a pool his victim's head, the claret that evaporated snow on contact with its heat, the soft, white naked little creature crawled away, maggot-like, across the broken landscape to find his fortune.

*** * * * *

The home at Shore's End that Frank and Mia once shared had gone to shit, to an extent. The lawn suffered. Of course, in the winter it wasn't quite that noticeable but come that following spring, neighbors hemmed and hawed about the knee-high crab grass, the yellow nests of dandelions, and the bits of garbage accumulating—a beer can here, a small colony of cigarette butts there—that dotted the yard. It wasn't that important, Frank figured; in the hierarchy of things, a lawn wasn't that important. He liked his tiles clean. He never slinked away from doing the toilet. The kitchen, where Mia was found—that didn't fare so well. He avoided it mostly. Did takeout a lot. The sink was starting to smell.

The tall olive-skinned man in the faded black sweat-pants and old Yankees shirt was off the force—on disability for mental issues. They had cleared him of Mia's murder and told him that the door was always open for him to come back; told him the door was always open, as he put all the contents of his locker that could fit in a small bag and abandoned the rest. But he had no plans beyond

the day. The pills hurt his head, but he needed them.

And there was a time when Frank considered taking up a handful of stakes and going out and ridding the world of those creatures—he certainly had the stature, skills, and knowledge to do it, and what he didn't have could be learned in the field. But it was too much trouble, and he decided against it. Besides, to become a Hunter would have placed the man in a terrible spot of conflict of interest. Because he had Billy Richard Rooke's vampire body chained in his basement.

Oh, Billy Richard could be pleasant enough, when the mood suited him. The man, who was manacled hand and foot and neck to several heavy-duty eyelets bolted to the floor, had enough length of chain to make the experience almost somewhat casual, and he had cable television, and a DVD player and Super Nintendo to keep him occupied. But his demand for blood was rather insistent, and it kept Frank patronizing every pet-store and animal shelter not only in Long Island, but the other boroughs and New Jersey as well.

And sometimes—well, sometimes Billy Richard would be in a particularly *foul* mood, and he would curse and yell and threaten and his partner could hear his cries all the way on the second floor, the basement's sound-proofing barely containing it from the ears of the neighbors. And it was all a bit of a bother—and seemed rather *gay*, besides—but having his friend near him gave the window some comfort. And *anything*, Frank decided, was better than being alone.

HAPPY GIRL

After Tara Amadeo had cleaned out her bank account, packed up her trunk, moved into another hotel downtown, went outside, bought \$30 worth of Chinese and a case of wine, got shitfaced, fell asleep, and woke up at around 4:00 AM with "Citizen Kane" playing on Turner Classic Movies and a rather loud gay couple fucking next door, she reached a series of startling conclusions that forever altered the course of her life (the end of which she was rapidly approaching). The witch had finally recognized--without the benefit and masking of such devices as "staying calm" and "looking for the silver lining"--that Pris Baxter (which she kinda sorta really liked, in her way) and virtually all of Dermaco were dead, that she had no place to go, that even when she had a place to go it was so morally, spiritually, and emotionally bereft as to have been almost worthless in terms of the development of her person. Then she realized, much to her great astonishment, that she actually *cared* about such things such as morals, spirit, and emotion. And then she conducted a summarial review of her life thus far, which, at such a preternatural hour, and concerning a particularly colorful lifestyle as her own, is not recommended for those with predispositions to existential melancholy.

And so Tara decided to Start Over, which, considering that what was left of her previous starting over exercise was presently being studied on the cool metal trays of baffled forensic scientists at Quantico, was probably a good idea. But, in consideration of the fact that her last Brand New Life was, in the end, a bit of a bust, and more than a little unholy, the witch took great pains and care with the Latest Chapter. The first stop was at Borders, where the woman purchased two shopping-bags full of self-help books so that she could better understand her true essence and not fuck up again. With the help of Caroline Myss, Izalya Vanzant, Julia Cameron, and Shakti Gawain Tara learned that her True Self was

not Vanguard of Chaos as she had erroneously thought, but instead was a Succulent Wild Womyn with an unlimited potential for goodness and creativity. Through Dr. Phil she gleaned the empowering revelation that the control and trajectory of her life was completely in her hands, and that no problem, crippling neurosis, or seeming Crisis was insurmountable as long as she broke it down into manageable pieces and applied logic to it. And from dear Dr. Chopra she discovered that we were all just vibrating atoms in a swirling sea of love and that it was *all good*.

It was a time of gentle self-discovery and personal inventory for the witch, and she had not known such peace and oneness with the Universe since those sun-dappled days under the sweeping poplars of Kennedy College, a bit before the time her and Molly became evil and tried to destroy the fabric of reality. She could be found more often than not walking the streets of downtown Manhattan in an easy amble that had much margin for stopping to browse or simply bask in the glory of creation, and need no glamour to make herself unrecognizable to any that might have known her in a previous incarnation. Her brown hair was cut short in a casual, wash-and-wear look and she had eschewed her blacks and purples in their various slinky, shiny, or fuzzy textiles in favor for a pair of soft, loose jeans, layered cotton shirts in mellow greens and yellows, and a pair of flip-flops. Gone was the diamond-studded bling, long packed away were the silver and moonstone and bloodstone and onyx wicked jewelry that she used to wear--now simply a string of coral-colored wooden beads engraved with generic Chinese lettering encircled her right wrist with a cord. And Simplicity itself became a big part of it--she had considered Dermaco a carnival of materialist distraction, but now she was pulling apart those distractions and finding her *core*--a core that would gravitate towards new distractions, yes, but ones that would be Right and True.

Her favorite past time was to sit at one cafe or another (usually Starbucks or the Starbucks at Barnes and Nobles) with her sketch pad (*yes! she was drawing again! eep! wasn't that exciting?*) and watch life (LIFE!) go by while sipping on a Frappucino. Sometimes she would do a quick sketch with her

charcoal of the interesting people she would see there, like men with the voices of valley girls dressed in brightly colored linen suits with sandals blathering away on cell phones while typing on their Vaios, or other women dressed in earth tones sipping coffee and sketching people. Tara had even contemplated creating her own independent comic book--sort of like Julie Doucet without the elephant sex or the titties--based on her own unique and amusing experiences. It was a worthwhile goal, since she was living off her savings from Dermaco and had nothing else better to do--but of course such a project involved many things that seemed to be too much trouble, such as drawing all those boxes with the ruler and lettering. But maybe she could hire someone to do the lettering.

Anyway, the details didn't matter, and she was under no pressure, and everything was *open*--and, most importantly of all, she felt no more temptation to use her magick. None. She realized that by using the occult to impose her will (or the will of well-paying others) on the Universe, she was breaking the *flow*. It was, in addition to simplicity, all about the flow, of letting things unfold naturally, and she finally understood how the natural workings of the world were far more fantastic and wonderful than anything a ritual or spell or supernatural means could accomplish. Of course, her moratorium on the magick did not preclude her from dabbling a bit in the Women's Mysteries, a bit of the Wicca, but that was okay because Wicca aligned itself to the Flow, to the Natural Order of Things, and that made it good. In Wicca, one might do chants or dance skyclad under a waxing moon but it was never to actually get any sort of result or achieve any real purpose (actually, sometimes it all seemed pretty fucking pointless, but that's neither here nor there). It was just a way of generating good karma and aligning oneself to the flow--which, really, was going to flow whether you performed the barenaked dance or not, but it was always more comfortable to be aligned so that way Destiny didn't slap you upside the head unawares. In contrast, the witch could see now that the occult tradition that she had practiced--bastardized aspects of High Magick mashed with Abdul the Mad Arab--was a distinctly *male* (read: oppressive) tradition. She was tired of being an unwitting promulgator of the Patriarchy. Which brought up another point. (The short-haired brunette took a

long frothy sip of her iced beverage and sat back thoughtfully in her sticky Starbucks chair, sliding a bare foot out of one of her flip-flops)

It was all men's fault. Men were stupid, selfish, and had stupid dumb little ugly dickies.

She had remembered how it had been a man who first brought Molly Griep and her together, and a man who tore them apart. The catalyst for their dissolution, as mentioned before, was the Cute Goth Boy From The Library. He had been a decent fuck but a slightly dull lad, and Tara remembered how disappointed she was to discover, after an hour or so of conversation, that he was nothing like the person Molly had constructed him to be. Goth Boy had just been an average 24-year-old from a working-class family in Queens who was pursuing a degree in sports events marketing and only wore his leathers and boots because his older brothers and his friends did it and it was "cool." The most Goth music he listened to was KISS, and he blanched upon seeing a copy of The Witch's Bible on the coffeetable when he first entered the apartment and asked in a concerned voice if they had worshipped the devil. And it felt like to her, as she humped him on the floor that only the night before her and Molly were spacing out and Dreaming upon, that she lost something somehow by the carnal act--and it wasn't a question of morality to her, it was just a matter of *Reality*, and it was like Molly always said, that Reality Was Boring. Better not to have fucked at all and entered the Heavenly Kingdom of one's own carefully constructed, heavily invested-in fucked-up fantasy. And then of course, what happened after, when her roommate came home so unexpectedly, well...we will get back to that soon enough, I assure you.

But the man who, unwittingly, brought the two young women together who would eventually finish what Parsons and Hubbard started in that Nevada desert was another animal entirely. Professor Orlen West's elective in Literature of Magic had piqued both Griep's nascent interest in the occult and Amadeo's finely-honed instinct for easy classes which were kind of interesting but didn't involve anything too demanding. Professor West's syllabus would take the girls on a trip from Medea to Macbeth, from Faustus to Frank Baum, and of course a

rudimentary introduction to the Great Poet Aleister Crowley. But under the merely literary pursuit and meditation on a specific theme there lay a queer sense of both skepticism and belief in the actual subject matter. To Molly, whose own magickal practices over the course of the semester evolved from reciting a simple chant to Epona the Horse-Goddess to elementary necromancy, this struck a cord, as if there was an unspoken conversation between them; and her pointed questions in class, clearly made to demonstrate her arcane knowledge, piqued West's interest as well. Of course, certainly the fact that the blond was a nice piece of untrdden-upon ass, if she only unbound that hair and bought some contacts, didn't hurt either.

The Professor's interest in Tara followed similar "piece-of-ass" lines, but was also complicated by the fact that the willowy brunette was, though sweet, a rather unintentionally spooky character and he thought perhaps he sensed some magick in it. Though it was very true that he was outwardly a vigorous skeptic, he always held out that bit of hope that the Fantastic might be real, that Crowley and Mathers and Blavatsky and the others were not merely opium-eaters and raving lunatics. And there was just something goddamned strange about the shy tall woman with the owl-glasses that always sat in the back row and sketched anime versions of The Last Supper on her desk with her Bic, and it was either mild autism or magick, the bald, bearded man was almost sure of it. Also, Tara had included a few dirty words and sexual situations in her paper for a creative writing assignment he had given, and he figured that it wa a sign she was Easy.

However, it was not in Literature of Magic that Tara and Molly became friends; quite the contrary, the taller woman was somewhat intimidated by the other's aggressive participation in class and the richness and extent of her Personal Mythology (of which she herself had none). But months later, when Tara was attending West's course "Crowley: The Other Dead White Male," a rather inappropriate incident in his office involving a basket of chicken fingers with a hole in the bottom drove the sensitive lass to the campus peer counseling center, where Molly--because she herself was obviously so goddamned psychologically well-adjusted--was on duty and waiting. The bespectacled blond

with the mature-beyond-her-years demeanor and intense blue eyes immediately felt for the other girl's tale of a horny middle-aged man and poultry gone awry; and more than "felt" the compact little woman was *enraged*, caught in what would become an obsessive crusade that far outweighed an outsider's normal involvement in such a situation. And so was forged a friendship. And when they became proficient at magick, they hurled revenge against him, incensed at his inability to have just admired them for their obvious talent and genius alone, incensed at his stooping so low and making the final unforgivable sin of considering them as potential sexual partners; but to their knowledge it seemed as if the hex had no effect.

It was just starting to get dark, and the ambient jazz music that you could purchase as a special CD at the front counter had been turned off. Tara sucked the dregs out of her Frappucino, looked over the day's work in her sketch pad (a vague, unruled grid and the title in puffy graffiti style letters: "Tara's So-Called Life"), slung the strap of her green Le Sportsac over her shoulder, and started the journey back to her hotel room in Chelsea. Though the portrait of the City that she had painted in her mind during these periods of time between the last stirrings of youthful idealism and the joys of materialistic excess was somewhat on the Jacob Riis meets Nan Goldin side of things, recently she had acquired a refreshing new perspective. Sure, there weren't a heck of a lot of trees or grass Downtown--but what there was, in front of the rich people's houses, were beautiful and well-cared for and if you only ventured to take a stroll you could partake in their beauty and even have a cherry blossom petal or two fall upon your head in the Springtime. And yes, it did seem as if large stretches of the area no longer served any purpose other than to be shopping drags for well-heeled Japanese students. But the truth was that Banana Republic, Urban Outfitters, Benetton, the Body Shop and the others were for *everybody* to enjoy, remarkable places where one, regardless of actual financial status or debt situation, could easily acquire the tools that society (and MTV) teaches are necessary in order to be attractive, respected, loved, and fuckworthy. And you could be a Negative Nelly about things and cry "commercialization" or you could see the situation for

the great democratizing force that it was.

And, true, maybe a lot of that anarchic energy and artistic fervor that had been part and parcel of Soho and the Village had gone away somewhere, we know not where--but there were still free spirits about, ensconced in the nooks and crannies, potential harbingers of the next radical movements in the Humanities. You just had to look a little *harder*, that's all, and certainly you don't want a little pity for yourself just because you have to work to find your culture, do you?

Take Happy Girl, for instance.

As Tara Amadeo left St. Mark's and passed by Cooper Union her eye was caught by a short, black-haired girl sitting on a lawn chair with a collage of different-sized canvases around her, the paintings leaning against the pock-marked, chocolate-colored building and lined up on a ledge created by a row of masonry. Each canvas was brightly painted in primary colors and featured a little girl with a tiny limbless body and a Hello Kittyesque hydrocephalic head. The figure had two blue dots for eyes that rested on either side of her wide ovoid face, two cute black pigtails that stuck out of the top of her cranium like quotation marks, three small dots representing freckles in the center where her nose would be, and a wide smile that literally stretched from ear-to-ear. Each painting either presented the girl in various situations, such as the circus, the beach, or Las Vegas, or simply reproduced the head alone on different colored backgrounds with the word "Happy" on top and "Girl" on the bottom--and if one looked from the paintings back to the artist one would note immediately that they were representations, however abstract, of herself. The young woman, who appeared to be in her early twenties, also had the pigtails, which stuck out of the top of her round head like fuses, the large saucer-like blue yes, shining brilliantly under long dark lashes, and a sea of freckles over her high, broad cheekbones and nub of a nose. She dressed plainly in a faded aqua-colored tank-top and cutoffs, and though she was a little on the chunky side she wore it well, the excess poundage wrapped around her small body lovingly and tight. *She smells of cocoa butter and hemp*, Tara thought.

“Hi...how much?”

“Well, they’re all different prices,” the woman said animatedly, apparently relishing the opportunity to address her wares. “It all depends on size...and also how *special* each one is to me.”

Receiving no quantifiable answer, Tara pointed at a medium-sized round canvas of the girl looking out of the window of a Swiss chalet, two giraffes knee-deep in snow flanking her from either side. The young woman scratched a nickel-sized clot on her elbow.

“Oh, *that* one? That one...” Her pink tongue stuck partially out of her mouth and curled inward in thought. “...twenty dollars.”

The witch unhesitatingly dug out a crumpled twenty out of her jean pocket and smoothed it out.

“Here you go...uh...”

“Do you need a bag,” the artist asked quickly, barely able to contain her excitement at the sale, “because, like, I don’t have one...sorry. But if you really *needed* one...”

“No, I’m good,” Tara said, tucking the canvas under her arm with her sketch pad. “Uh...so what’s your name?”

“Oh, I’m the Amazing Jenny.”

“Well...Jenny...you do good stuff. Uh...you a student here or something?”

The woman flashed Tara an incredibly wide, toothy smile and shook her head, making the little pigtails shudder and shake like deelyboppers.

“Not anymore...I graduated last year. Now I’m just trying to get my feet wet in the art world. I’ve done a couple of really small viewings, some flyers for a local dry-cleaner, stuff like that.”

The sky had deepened further from a mellow darker blue to violet, and the evening breeze of a not-quite-Spring day chilled Tara, prompted her to rub with her free hand the skin of her other arm.

“Uh...well, I think it’s really great you’re pursuing your dreams and all. So many people get crushed by the ‘man.’ Anyway, I better head out...good luck!”

And when Tara got back to her motel room--which wasn’t as awful and

Brady Bunch as the other place, but had that aura about it like a lot of fucking had happened there, and which prompted the witch to buy her own pillows--she propped the circular painting against the TV set, flopped on the unmade bed, and admitted to herself that she very definitely wanted to have sex with the Amazing Jenny.

But her designs on Jenny were not merely born of carnal yearnings, nor was sex the only goal. Tara...just wanted to get *close* to her...just wanted...to be in her world. To see things through her eyes. To get some of that magic back--not *magick* with a k, but the down-to-earth magic of living, of doing what one was meant to do and not getting sidetracked by all the bullshit society and so-called peers strong-arm and threaten and harass and guilt one into. The whole trick...was doing what God wanted you to do. And obviously, what God wanted the Amazing Jenny to do was paint Happy Girl. And she was doing it!

The witch folded her arms under her head and smiled manically at the high, tin-plated ceiling, whose surface, including an ancient-looking and immobilized small fan with truncated blades, was painted a smoky white.

Jenny was *doing* it! She was doing what she was meant to do. The world, the City with its relentless grind of heavy-treaded wheels, had not crushed her! It was what her and Molly were supposed to do with that comic book, "Fools and Vampires." They should have been standing out in front of Cooper Union, selling Xeroxed, hand-stapled copies of the issues, getting noticed, spreading the word, telling people the bare, unvarnished truth of what they felt and lived through. And why didn't they do that?

Oh yes, the *Evil*.

But the evil, the unfortunate circumstances, *everything*--Molly, Kinky, Armand, Alex bailing, Pris and Dermaco--*everything*, over, over, it was over, all the loose ends were tied and the story was over, over, the story was over, over with the white charred bodies on top of her at the entrance to The Rusty Nail, over, and the only way it would stay alive was if she allowed it to. And she resolved right then and there, in the glow of that wonderful Happy Girl painting, to just let go, to just let it go, and to bring someone like the Amazing Jenny into her

life, bring her into her life and let the sunshine from her being melt all those years of jadedness and spike-tipped antibodies that were formed in the wake of unmet expectations. Jenny, or someone like her, but it was *coming*, the new day was dawning, and that old story, it was ended, it was ended.

*** *** ***

With each success with Jenny--the first, awkward attempts at flirtation that was met with the opening of a floodgate, the mere happy fact of the girl's sexuality (it would have really sucked if she had some boho boyfriend with a honking big dick and a hemp string full of fimo beads under his scraggly goatee), the first date, the sex that made what she did with Pris look like Calista Flockhart planting an awkward open-mouthed smoochie on Lucy Liu during sweeps week, the decision to live together, their plans to adopt a Cambodian baby--Tara always looked metaphorically and literally over her shoulder to detect in advance the hammer that she felt was lying in wait. All the self-help readings and mediations and ear-candling had failed to rid the witch of the this thin but tough thread in her brain that held to the notion that she was doomed. And she figured that, realistically, after all she had been though (and put others through), such a dysfunctional, irrational thought pattern would take a long time to get over--and it would be got over only after the years to come had convinced her that life indeed was not like that, not like some cosmic Todd Solondz film.

And to that end the Amazing Jenny's unquenching spirit and unquenchable zest for life had worked wonders on the woman. She was so open, so understanding, so *giving*, and so totally understanding of Tara's bisexuality (Jenny being strictly a lesbian) once it was established that the witch was not one of those confused, trouble-making bi's who were only attracted to women out of an emotional deficiency born of a lack of mother-daughter bonding in the first few years of life and a near-pathological distrust of the male gender as the result of abuse and betrayal.

Of course, there was also the matter of Tara's previous life to be addressed, which wasn't really addressed...well, it was *sort* of addressed, as

addressed as it needed to be. The witch simply told her lover that she was just into the Women's Mysteries, was all, and had read some tarot at Bar Mitzvahs and whatnot. And when the two moved into a small but fashionable space uptown by Columbia University, the first thing Tara did was pack up all her doodads and books of High Magick in her trunk and shove it vertically on the top shelf of a junk closet in a dark, unused part of the apartment. But the tall short-haired woman's desire to cut off the ties of her past extended far beyond the mere binding of occult objects. All the various and sundry acquaintances she had made in the past--the ones that were still *alive*, at any rate--were cast away as if they or Tara had fallen off the edge of their respective Earths. Of course, she never really had them breaking down the doors of her life anyway, as she was, at least in her former life as a shaman/whore, somewhat of a misanthrope. But she stopped thinking about them, if that meant anything, and if she saw one warlock or another walking down the street she simple cast the subtlest of glamours to avoid speaking to them--or cross the street or hurriedly slip into Gray's Papaya, whichever.

The only real instance of her worlds colliding--and it was so sudden and ultimately ridiculous that all she could do was laugh--was when her and the Amazing Jenny were at Circuit City and all of the sudden Malcolm Dust's bearded visage appeared on all 50 or so television sets all at once. Upon sighting the multiplied image of her ex-mentor Tara had clutched Jenny's chubby arm in a death-grip and thought her bowels would come loose (which, considering her bowel situation at the time might have been a blessing, albeit untimely). But though the man had apparently gained about 30 pounds there wasn't anything truly scary or sinister about him, other than the spectre of the world that they two used to share. And as Dust went on to speak--he was being interviewed as an "Expert" on some Discovery Channel program about Ouija Boards--it was quite, hilariously evident that he had forsook that spectral world as well. For he was being interviewed as a Skeptic: that's what it said on the little animated bar under his head, "Malcolm Dust: Skeptic and Magic Historian." And he went on to express the opinion that those who believed in Ouija, Tarot, Astrology,

Exorcisms, and the paranormal and magick in general were woefully insecure souls who used such fancies as crutches to deal with the demands of reality. And Tara laughed so frightfully much, so heartily, that Jenny feared she might be having an attack of some sort, and vigorously patted her back as if to dislodge some ill humour.

The women lived off the older one's savings (the Nest Egg being explained away as her Aunt Ruthie's inheritance), and though the question as to how they would support themselves after the money ran out always hovered mistily about, like a rather gray fairy, they figured that once their respective artistic careers started to strike the question would become moot. Tara decided--after taking a look at her companion's sketchbooks and portfolios and noting that the girl, when she so wished, could fashion a rather realistic and proportionate set of hands--that she would forgo her ambitions in the realm of illustration and become a writer. But the real hopes lay with the Amazing Jenny, and what Tara considered her impending Happy Girl Empire. For the Happy Girl image was so *iconic*, the art so innovative and transcendent in its simplicity and profound belief in the essential goodness of the world, that the older woman thought it would be the perfect design for T-shirts, dorm posters, and stuffed animals, as well of course being a gallery sensation. For Jenny to merely hawk her wares in front of smelly ol' Cooper Union while sitting on a lawn chair and breathing in the constant exhaust from the cars was not merely "not enough," it was downright *demeaning* in terms of the scope and existent of her talent.

And so Tara, who, in her idle hours at Dermaco (nearly all eight of them each weekday) had read the many booklets and magazines concerning the marketing of products that filled her file cabinet and lined the bookshelves of Pris's office, embarked on a massive campaign to bring Happy Girl to the attention of the larger community. It was a task she vowed never to taint with the unfair advantage of her magicks. And the woman, who in previous lives had been such an inconstant, wishy-washy, frankly mercenary and at times dishonorable slip of a girl, steadfastly stood by her vow, no matter how many rejections she and Jenny received from various companies and art houses and magazines for

Happy Girl, no matter how much it seemed as if this torrent--nay, orgy--of rejection flattened the small girl with the wide smile, bit by imperceptible bit, one call at a time. And yes, it hurt Tara to see her partner like that, to see that candle get a little dimmer each time--it *infuriated* her, in fact, infuriated her that all those idiots, who were probably all hiring their own relatives and buddies and fucktoys, could fail to see--

But still the witch would not use her magick, for to use magick was to break the flow of the Universe. And, as the beautiful Wiccan prayers went, we seek not to impose our own will on the universe but to accept whatever we get as being for the greatest good. Blessed be.

Finally, Tara shelled out a goodly portion of her own money to rent a space in DUMBO for a grand showing of the Amazing Jenny's work, entitled "The Happy Happy Girl Show." The event was as heavily advertised as could be afforded, and invitations were sent out to the art editors of the major New York newspapers and magazines, as well as to such local celebrities as Chloe Sevigny, Michael Musto, and Johnny Legend. And on the night before the show Tara stood before the closet in the shadowy unused spot in the apartment, going so far as to open the door partially and sneak an evil peak at that trunk up there with all the goodies inside it, beckoning, beckoning, begging, *begging* to set things on a predictable, secure, profitable course via the work of the subterranean angels, begging her to just cast a simple assemblage of sticks upon the floor, perhaps mixed with not so much as a single drop of sweat, and seize Destiny while it was still open, while the dime was still on its edge--

But no. A vow was a vow, and to break it, especially at such a crucial time, a time in which it would seem to be needed most, would only rain misfortune upon both women's close-cropped heads. And so the show came and went and was forgotton but for a smattering of articles, all written by the aforementioned Negative Nellys, one of which used the event as the centerpiece of its lament over what the reviewer termed the "Bowel Movement" in contemporary modern art.

And it just was *unnecessary*.

And Happy Girl--she didn't deserve it.

Happy Girl!, Tara thought in helpless rage, *how can you look at Happy Girl and not smile?!*

And by now the Amazing Jenny was in a terrible way, losing all her faith in both Happy Girl and her chosen vocation, and it was like the accumulation of allergens in one's physical system, they had about reached a critical mass within her small, ample-thighed body and she had apparently gone so far over the edge that a week or so after "The Happy Happy Girl Show" she was researching careers in sports events marketing on the internet. In response to her lover's panicked, horror-stricken reaction to the impending destruction of her sleeves-rolled-up Rosie the Riveter "We Can do It" attitude, Jenny responded, with a soft, newborn bag under each brilliant blue eye, that the money was running out.

And that was true. The money was running out.

And she went on to say with a hopeful, endearing twinkle in her eye that she could always work on Happy Girl in her spare time, or even concentrate more on her more realistic style, or develop new styles, *evolve*, do all sorts of wonderful things. In her spare time.

But what if you don't have the energy anymore to do it, Tara countered. What if, after a full day's work, and perhaps even more than a full day's work, maybe even work to do sometimes into the night besides, extra work just to make ends meet and to get ahead, extra work like the employees of Dermaco took home in thick brown folders and briefcases and sheaves of paper to read on the subway--what if after that it was just too damn tiring to turn back to the art? Or what if, after months and years of being immersed in the business world--and the so-called "creative" fields being the absolute worst in this department--she came to adopt the view that the only worthwhile artistic enterprises to embark on (or any enterprises for that matter) were the ones that were guaranteed to make money?

What then??, Tara asked with her hands clutched to her chest. But Tara knew--she would have to eventually go back to the salt mines herself. And there was no more Pris Baxter to give her iPods, no person as nutty or ballsy as a

vampire in such a position to hire her on the basis of her true skills (or at least, the only skills she had ever developed to any sort of achievement).

Of course, she always had her *book*--

Yeah right, as if she'd make a living off of that self-indulgent crap...

Shit.

Fuck.

Shit.

Shit!

(But I still love you, baby, this will be worked out and we'll be happy and everything will work out and our love will keep us together think of me babe whenever...)

*** *** ***

The ad for a mural-painter at this new club that was opening up on Broome was inconspicuous enough, just a mention in NY Press, and Tara would have missed it ordinarily but lucky for her she stumbled upon it in her frustrating search for "Maakies" amongst the restaurant listings and concert announcements, and, and it as the answer to a prayer.

And that prayer was:

"Oh please, most wise and benevolent Universe, I know that everything you do is right and for the best--even though sometimes it doesn't seem that way, but that's because our puny human brains are too limited--so I'll understand if the whole art thing is just a big waste of time and our dreams go South but if you can find it in your heart to maybe get us out of this somehow, and rescue us from a life of banality, because we really don't deserve it, we really have so much potential, so if you could perhaps help us out it would be great. And if you can't, I understand, like I said, and maybe you have some other fabulous plan we are not yet aware of--but it really would be nice if Jenny could get a gig and be excited again and I could maybe write a book and stuff. So. Thanks, Universe. Hope my entreaty doesn't get misconstrued as some sort of attempt to subvert

Your will. I'm cool."

When Jenny came home from her interview that day, a large white plastic bag from Pearl Paint filled with paints and brushes and goodies in her hand, that familiar toothy wide smile like sunshine below the row of freckles on her broad face, Tara sent a silent "thank you" to the Universe, though of course it was hardly necessary because of course this was all going according to the Divine Plan. And the witch reveled vicariously in the new energy brought into their apartment with the many sketches and designs, the many samples of paint daubed on large pieces of bristol, each streak marked with a number and a designation. And her partner left the house early in the morning with a motley collection of rolled-up papers under her arm and a sack of brushes and sponges over her shoulder and came back late each night, each night a little later, until she was tiptoeing into the apartment at 12:00, her thick but toned body, clad in a tank top and cutoffs, so covered with spatter that she looked like a Pollack painting. And she would kiss tenderly the sleeping forehead of the witch as she returned from the cleaning, her skin smelling faintly of turpentine, and crawl into bed with her, and it was all good.

Perhaps the break-neck pace and long hours were wearing the small, black-haired woman down a little bit, because she was looking a little tired, she was so tired that on weekend she didn't want to do anything, and maybe all that time indoors around the paint fumes contributed to her slightly ashy pallor, to the bruised color that began to float translucent within the gentle sags under her brilliant blue eyes. And Tara told her that it wasn't healthy to breathe up all that paint, advised her to take a break even though she knew how excited she was about the mural. And though the Amazing Jenny began to gradually lose her appetite and shadows alighted on her cheeks, and her eyes seemed almost like--like glass that needed a good Windexing--despite all this, her spirit, no doubt buoyed by the project and the creative opportunities it opened up for her not just materially but in her development as an artist, continued to soar, continued to be light even though in her weakened condition it seemed so dangerous, so overwhelming to her physical body, as if the energy could no longer be contained

in there.

And one day, as the two women sat side-by-side on the couch eating off of trays with a pleasant coral-and-green Asian pattern on it, in a living room that was liberally decorated by Happy Girl paintings and all manner of pretty, exotic item to be found at Pier 1 and ABC Carpet, with shelves of beautiful goddess statues in porcelain and wood and clay and metal staring down over them in a protective, maternal embrace, one day as Jenny *tried* to be good, as she tried to swallow that piece of chicken cutlet on her plate, her lover cheering on--the young woman power-vomited blood in an arc that sailed over her dish and tray and hit the dormant plasma television screen that was hanging like art on the wall in front of her. And Tara insisted she call 911, and Jenny didn't want her to.

*** *** ***

“I really don’t like this, Jen, I really think I should call...” The witch, clad in loose jeans and a green T-shirt with Lakshmi, Hindu deity of mercy and the words “Old Navy” printed on it in orange, spoke with a trembling edge to her voice as she looked vainly through the medicine cabinet for some sort of pill or elixir or some sort of *something* that could help her partner. A few feet away, partially obscured by a bamboo-pattern shower curtain, the amazing Jenny sat in the bathtub in her panties, her skin almost the tcolor of milk and residual crust and wrinkling around her pale, chapped lips from the vomiting. “I feel like I’m killing you by not calling 911--*shit!*” Tara squinted skeptically at a bottle of Pepto Bismol and shoved it back into the cabinet with a clatter. “I should call 911--“

“No,” Jenny pleaded weakly, and then again, but now strangely more insistent, stronger, “No. I’m *fine*, honey, really.” She had now twisted in the tub so she was facing her lover and stretched an arm out to rub her on her exposed ankle. On the wall opposite, on the door over the utility rack, was a little framed painting of Happy Girl riding in a boat with two monkeys, a large umbrella over their heads. “I--I don’t *like* hospitals. And it costs too much money.”

“You were *bleeding*, Jen--and your circulation is terrible.”

"I've *always* had lousy circulation, and, and the blood's just from my stomach lining, honey, from the *acid*..." Her huge blue eyes, still with that dirty window look on the surface, narrowed and looked to the side. "I don't know, maybe I'm getting an *ulcer* or something...so I'll just cut down on spicy foods, and...and once this project is over the stress is going to stop, you'll see..."

"You know, I *told* you to take it easy," Tara turned to face the woman in the bathtub, wincing at how much of a goddamn nag she sounded even to her own ears. "I told you, told you for weeks. Why can't you just reduce your *hours*--"

"The Scarlet Moon is set to open in only another week--it's, it's down to the wire, I can't..."

"Yeah, but is it worth *killing* yourself over, Jen?"

"Look..." Jenny answered sharply, raising her voice and slowly rising to her feet in the tub, her rounded, clammy half-naked body in a hue that nearly matched the tile behind her. "This job is really, really, *really* important to me...and I thought...especially after the show went so bad...that you'd be *happy*..." The young woman started to sniffle, her pale breasts quivering. "I feel like--I feel like this is my *last chance*..."

God, I'm such a selfish twat, Tara chastised herself, as she approached her lover and embraced her.

"No, baby...no, baby, this isn't your last chance, you're doing *great*, and I'm so proud of you and..."

The witch froze.

"What," Jenny asked, a little puzzled, as her partner stopped rubbing her back and the silent seconds accumulated into awkwardness.

"Shit," Tara said in a barely audible voice.

"W-what?"

The taller woman suddenly pulled away and ran out of the room. The Amazing Jenny followed her into the kitchen, where Tara was standing over a different sink, clutching over the edges for support as she vomited a thin, milky stream of spit and tiny bits of food. She raggedly wiped her mouth with one hand and faced the small pasty girl with a gaunt expression.

“*What?*” Jenny asked again, her eyebrows and lips bent in concern.

“It’s...your *heart*...”

“What about my heart?”

“*Feel* your heart, Jen. Put your hand over your chest...”

Jenny did so and frowned.

“What, I don’t understand...”

“YOU DON’T HAVE A FUCKING HEARTBEAT, JEN!!!” Tara screamed, her arms tensely bent at the elbows and her hands balled into tight, white-knuckle fists. “There’s nothing going on in there!!”

The Amazing Jenny’s broad, tooth-filled smile spread across her face nervously, her canines slightly prominent and sharp-looking. She approached her lover, hands out in front of her and caressing the air--

“Honey-kitten, I think you’re kind of not seeing things clearly...”

Tara grabbed a steak knife out of the dish rack and pointed it towards the woman’s left breast.

“*That’s*--far enough. You...you just don’t seem very *surprised* about this, Jen. I-I don’t know, if *my* heart suddenly stopped beating, I’d be pretty concerned, I’d be on the phone with EMS but *you*, you just don’t seem surprised...Are you surprised? Or did you know what’s been happening all along? Happening to you?”

Jenny stopped in her tracks and looked hurt.

“How can you say this to me, Tara? How...only 15 minutes ago you were afraid I was going to *die*, and...”

“Well you’re *not* dying, Jen.”

“See--*this* was what I was afraid of.” The short woman in black pigtails had progressed in expression from merely hurt to offended, and she stuck her index finger in the air to punctuate her words. “Your reaction. I thought you’d be more *supportive*. I thought we were a committed couple.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t sign up for this part of the cruise, Jen. And when were you going to tell me? Or were you just going to sneak it up on me?”

“Why are you treating me like this?! It’s like...it’s like you’ve gone *mental* or

something..."

"When did you know? Were you *attacked*? Or *seduced*? If they left you alive, it was most likely seduction."

"Honey-kitten, I *love* you--doesn't that count for *anything*?"

"Just answer me if you were attacked or seduced!"

"It's not..."

"I HAVE TO KNOW!!"

Jenny's face creased and her eyes shut as if she tasted something terribly bitter, and she cowered and hovered her arms around her head in a fly-swatting motion.

"I can't *stand* this, I can't stand...all this *yelling*..." She looked up and locked eyes with Tara in desperation. "I had an *affair*, okay?! I had an affair...I was just so...I was just so *bored*! Bored with life, and, this woman...she made me feel *excited* about things again, I...I just...I just *fell* into it."

Tara's face doubled in the blade's narrow reflection.

"You should have *lied*, Jen."

FRIDAY

Tara dragged the knife across the surface of her left outer-forearm, causing the Amazing Jenny to first react on in horror, then hunger. In the blink of an eye she was bent over the limb, lapping away mindlessly at the capillary juices as the other woman looked on coldly.

“Yeah, get your *fill*, bitch--because it’s going to be the first and last time you do from *me*.”

The shorter woman lifted her head up from the wound, her mouth and nose smeared in watery claret.

“How...how can you *be* like this, Tara? What the hell happened to you? Were you *always* like this?”

“Like what?” The witch laughed bitterly. Across from her, on the kitchen wall, there hung a clock with no hands; she stifled the quick, momentary impulse to kill herself. “Like a fucking bitch? *Cold*? Did you expect me to just *understand*, to go throw a freakin’ *party* for you?”

“I thought I *knew* you! No wonder you don’t have any friends!”

“And I thought I *knew* you. But guess what? I could have guessed it. I could have guessed it from the moment I saw you, the moment I stepped into this. And now you’re so shocked and hurt. Poor Jenny.” The other woman made another grab for her still-bleeding arm but Tara pulled it away and held her back with the knife. “Now you’re just another fucking vampire like the rest of them. And I--I’m back to who I was. Because you see. I’ve had secrets too. And now it’s over.”

Jenny sat frustrated on a chair and regarded Tara with her big, dirty eyes.

“So you’re going to *kill* me?”

“Have you killed anybody yet?”

Jenny looked down at her pale feet.

“No--I haven’t completely turned yet. But I’m very close now. Once the vomiting starts--and it’ll get *worse*--“

"Well try to keep it off the percale sheets, *will* you Jen?"

"It isn't supposed to be this way...you're not supposed to *be* like this!"

Tears started to fall down her full, freckled cheeks. "You're supposed to stand beside me...or at least *cry*, or something. Didn't I *mean* anything to you? Didn't *any* of this mean anything to you? Didn't Happy Girl--"

"*Happy Girl*," the witch snapped back, her mouth twisted in disgust, "Happy Girl is the biggest goddamn lie in the world! And as for me *feeling* anything...when this fucking hits, when I finally fucking feel it--you *don't want to be here!*" Then she chuckled hollowly, looked up the handless clock, glanced at the white obscene thing--still so pretty--that used to be her girlfriend, then regarded the bloody cut on her arm in grim fascination. "Well...I guess it's all for the best, anyhow. You never *were* a very sketched-out character. This episode of my life...just seemed to flash by, a series of documented events with no real memories to back them up...it's all fading...and no, I haven't felt it yet, but I suspect when I do, you shouldn't be here...and I think...I will remember this betrayal, long after the reasons and personality have faded...I...I'm tired, m-my *reality...*" The room started to shake, but nothing moved, and the witch sensed that it was only her perception, simply the stress of the situation catching up with her. And still the creature sat sniffling on her chair, blaming her, blaming her for not being so very understanding...

"So *tell* me, Jen--who did it?"

The little woman looked back at her with her dull saucer-eyes, as dull as a doll.

"So you can kill her?"

"I'm not killing anybody. Just tell me who."

"No, you're going to kill her..."

"She's already *dead*, Jen. And I'm not a killer. I am many things, as you are starting to see, as you might see more, but I'm not a killer."

"It won't do any good to tell you."

A fast, tight smile darted across Tara's face as she held her knife up right above the wound on her arm, letting the tip of the blade indent her flesh.

“Tell me and I’ll let you have another round.”

“Scarlet Moon’s owner...Rache Merrywether.”

Hahaha, some lizard-headed David Letterman of the infernal intoned as he was fucking Adolf Hitler in hell.

*** *** ***

“But you promised me *blood*--where are you going?!”

The tall short-haired brunette, her face curled in a fury and her hand still holding the knife, stalked across the kitchen and towards the shadowy, forgotten space at the back of the apartment, where the closet was that held her bound-up shit. Jenny followed, but only at a distance she deemed safe, for though she did not think her lover had it within her to destroy the vampire, a bit of violence did not seem out of the question. Tara completely ignored her except for one moment when, on the way to the closet, grabbed a shirt off the bed and threw it at the small woman.

“And cover those titties up!”

Then the witch flung open the closet, brought down the trunk (nearly bringing herself down in the process), undid the straps and ropes she had tied around it in more optimistic days (though days not so optimistic that she was willing to risk giving up the contents entirely), brushed away all the hyssop and sage she had poured on top of the items to help neutralize any bad or tempting vibes the might generate, and fished around the objects and books until she found a grimoire bound in black leather with still more ropes and belts doubled up around it. And in the grimoire she found, hand-written in her own chicken-scratch script:

Back In Black: The Darkest Magick

And it was a spell she had devised but never used, and never used because, despite all the unpleasant experiences she suffered through over the years she was a witch, none stuck out so sore that it seemed to justify Back In Black. In fact, much like the Doomsday Device in “Strangelove,” Back In Black

was devised never to really be used, but to exist merely as a fail safe, a security blanket, an Omega for a time that would never be.

But if she was to kill Rache she'd need *power*. Because she realized that the real reason she never heeded Roy's warning to slay the vampire or else was not out of some deep moral center--the witch felt she had the morality and ethics of a cucumber--but because--

IT WAS TOO MUCH TROUBLE!

And so she never killed Rache--

Not even when the Invisible College were infected and she suspected deep down the horrible little bloodsucker was involved--

Not even when it was fairly certain that Pris--*Pris*, who the witch was kind of fond of, in her way--and Dermaco perished at Caress hands, due to Rache's machinations--

It was simply too much trouble to kill Rache, because her first tangle with her was markedly unpleasant, and she had no wish to repeat it--she had no wish to place herself in the way of possible mutilation and death if she didn't *have to*--

And now the bitch poisoned the one good sunny positive thing in her life--

And so what if Jenny turned out to be unfaithful? Tara might have never known, if it wasn't for that damned vampirism; she might never have known, and it would have been for the best, because all not-knows were for the best, and honesty and truth the realm of fools, of the *miserable*--

And now Rache had to die--not because the Nine had told her to do it, but because for the first time in her life she really, honestly wanted to destroy another, because she saw the vampire for the pestilence that she was and owned the personal responsibility that came with that knowledge. And the witch had to be strong, and Back In Black invoked--

Tara pushed the small couch against the livingroom wall and carefully lifted the dining trays, one in each hand, and hurled them along with their contents into the kitchen, sending chicken, rice, and china flying. She then took from Jenny's stash a can of paint and a large brush and painted an inverted pentagram, about 4 feet across, on the parquet floor in the center of the room,

the witch considering the widescreen plasma TV with Jenny's bloody vomit on it a suitable backdrop. And then the tall, short-haired brunette, who hadn't stopped seething once since her lover admitted her infidelity with the demon-bitch from hell, attempted to catch her breath, give her heart a chance to stop throbbing, and take stock of the situation and consider one last time what she was about to do.

The witch stood outside and to the left of the still-wet circle; she took a summarial look at the space, at the icons and idols she had accumulated, all these symbols of what she thought womanhood was, all these so-called benevolent and protective symbols and statues representing the cozy little pseudo-religion that had nothing to do with the culture and substance of what the images actually originally represented. Benevolence and protection within the Sisterhood--but it was no different from the realm of the begonaded, they were all fucking humans trapped in the fact of their own bastard human nature, and the only ones who weren't were vampires and they were even worse.

All my icons, Tara mused, *what are they really?* What are they really, when the crutches are knocked way and there's nothing left that's pure and true?

The witch plucked a ceramic statue of Kwan Yin from a shelf and threw it into the heart of the pentagram, shattering the object to atoms.

“SHIT! THEY'RE ALL WORTHLESS SHIT!”

And so Tara set to work destroying every statue and figure in the room, hurling them down towards the red circle as if Kali herself. And it wasn't unintentional, what she did, it was not merely some knee-jerk reaction to inflamed passion that set her on this spree of destruction--nothing witches do are unintentional, because they believe fundamentally that nothing in the cosmos is unintentional, it all has some arcane, oft-sinister meaning, driving one and all inexorably towards Destiny. No, by breaking what once she so cherished and believed in over the altar--such as it was--on the floor, Tara demonstrated the seriousness of her intention to the gods--and her willingness to be an active participant in the imposition of an individual Will and the spirit of Chaos into Universe and Order.

But the shattering of one's toys, of course, was only the start of it.

The witch was never big on long, elaborate rituals, as her attention-span and capacity for patience wasn't very large. Instead, her workings were fast, messy, improvised, and sprung directly from the spontaneity of her soul. So Back In Black was not a detailed set of instructions and the like--it simply consisted of a grouping of arcane words meant to be said aloud, words that she hand-picked from the blackest grimoires available. And though the chants themselves were very powerful, they could not come into its total effectiveness unless the other elements--the sincerity of emotion and intent, the shattering of the toys, and the feeding of the gods--were present.

Tara ripped off her shirt and stood in her bra just inside the foot of the pentagram, stood before the wreckage of what had been her life (maybe not her life, really, just "a" life, one of many, lives and eras as fleeting and flimsy as the fashion of the moment). She had the grimoire open in her left hand and held the kitchen knife in her right.

And it was all leading up to this--

She let the blade slow-dance across her abdomen in long, loving strokes and began to chant:

"Shurrim Lamech Ssisgi Togarmah Ennege Madai..."

At the smell of the blood Jenny, who had been watching from the safety of the bathroom doorway, attempted to leap panther-like into the circle and drink the nectar from her lover's belly--but her small, thick body bounced off some sort of invisible barrier that stood around the circle, and she landed with a crash into a large Happy Girl canvas of her creation's head in a swirling, psychedelic background, wrenching the painting off the nail that held it up.

And Tara continued to cut and slice her skin, ignoring the pain, relishing how it allowed her to express how she felt. And the blood fell in drops and hesitant streams upon the broken idols, upon the inverted pentagram, feeding it, feeding the gods, and she chanted:

"Gether Limda Peleg Xiduti Serug Ilani Nahor..."

And the witch simply downloaded all of it--all the disappointment, all the

struggle--even all the self-hatred--into the pentagram, and visualized it converting to black magick the way sunlight and minerals conveited during photosynthesis, and the black magick, it was a *key*, and the black magick, it was a *Way*. and the Chaos--it never judged her or made her feel unworthy or out-of-place. It was what it was--a gift of protection provided by the gods, without which she was merely a baby tortoise without a shell. And all the moralizing, all the intentions to be "good" and "right" and live a "correct" life, all it did was serve her out on a plate for creatures like Rache, and to be humiliated and killed in this Godless universe, with no Heaven or Jesus to say "look for the silver lining in it" and "you're the bigger person, they just don't know it yet."

"Ashak Almodad Gigim Diklah Edin Keturah..."

And the magickal energy, a blackish-green glow more mist than light, densely packed the area within the bounds of that circle, bathing the woman inside it--

"Lotan Masqim Onam Qibit Anah Ruxisha Hamran..."

And suddenly Tara felt what could only be described as a sword of vibrating energy ripping her back open from the tailbone up to the base of her skull--and upon its impact she fell to the floor, the barrier up around the ritual circle containing her body inside, letting no part of her--as it crunched and scratched upon the shattered wood and glass and ceramics--stray--

The "sword," it had activated something in her, tripped off a sequence of some kind and the woman continued to chant from memory, lying on her tingling back, saying:

"Kurios Achbor Ganzir Mibzar Imdikula Azubah Neti..."

For some strange reason she thought of that night when she fucked the Cute Goth Boy on the floor, so many years ago, fucked him as Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love" was playing, and she could still hear the song, and it was like time was stuttering in and out of frame, and she could catch glimpses of the young man on top of her, going in and out of her--

"Asaru Eker Kutulu Segub Urilia Abital Magan Nepheg..."

And it was like she could still feel those sensations in her body, in her

crotch, and she shook her hips into the air as if it was still happening--

“Meshullam Ssaratu Igali Egurra Eliashib Pirik Hazar...”

Still happening--

“Shadduya Ziklag Athanatos Lecah Libat Pallu Kakolomani-Yash...”

And it felt as if she had been pulled out of all creation, and left the Uptown apartment and all of it, even History, behind.

The face that hovered before her, the body--sometimes it was the Cute Goth Boy, and sometimes--

A new face was emerging--

It had longer hair, like Samson, and its face, though pretty, was more masculine, like a Greek god--

And she recognized the new image, that new face--it was the reddish man from her reverie that night on her birthday, when she cut her finger on that razor-blade, and...

“Let me into you,” it said with a kind, amicable voice into her mind, its image still intercutting with that of Goth Boy, “it’s time for you to *receive* it.”

“Y-you’re *beautiful*....”

“It’s time for you to receive it--are you excited?”

“Yes.”

And the next moments were indescribable, and she was taken far beyond consciousness, far beyond existence, and everything that she ever knew or had ever perceived had dropped out of frame like ballast fast and hard into the sea.

*** *** ***

Tara couldn’t remember or care at what exact point she was aware of being back in this reality, in this apartment, in this situation. Truth was, she probably was active long before the consciousness returned, and the consciousness was of a strange, once-removed, almost cinematic quality as to maybe not qualify as being fully conscious at all. But she was now in a form and frame of mind beyond such hair-splitting.

Outwardly, she looked the same, though her self-inflicted wounds were completely scarlessly healed and her skin had a slight gray cast to it. But inside--she could feel the *power*, could feel what was now possible, could feel that things inside her skin were not running as they did before. And she felt also a *confidence*--a confidence that, though it didn't wash away her desire for revenge, cancelled out all the self-effacement and damned vulnerability she had endured over her latest hurt and the entire catalog from her past as well. She was confident that she would prevail. She was confident that she could *right* things. It was a confidence without the benefit of peace, but at least she no longer cowered.

The witch went into her clothing drawers and looked for something appropriate to kill Rache in. Finding nothing but earth and citrus tones, she frowned, looked down at her blood-stained bra and jeans, and visualized a black shirt, pants, and pair of boots, and sure enough it arrived, out of the ether, of a splendid cut and texture and design. It briefly crossed her mind that she could just as easily think Rache dead--but no, that wasn't right, that wasn't the way it was supposed to be. After gaining such power, anything less than spectacular, intimate destruction would not suffice, would be an *insult*, even--

She looked down at her grayed hands; how they seemed to vibrate internally, how everything inside of her--her bones, her heart, her muscles, her brain, her eyes--they were all *humming*, every cell of her body, every atom singing, and it felt so *right*, her present condition. And she wasn't joyous about it--to say she was "happy" would be a stretch--because there was a certain grimness about her purpose and a sort of new attitude in her mind that precluded joyfulness. She just *was*. She was this new, potent thing.

As she was headed out the door she heard a moan and squeak almost like the rubbing of a balloon, but coming from a voice. She immediately assumed it must have been Jenny, who she had not seen or thought about since before the ritual, and walked straight to the bathroom, where she sensed she would be. The scene that met the witch's eyes would have quite adversely effected her in a previous incarnation, but now it was just another two-dimensional tableau, like a

horror movie on TV: the small, dark-haired woman was curled up naked in a fetal position on the floor, as white as typing paper, spasming in ugly, unnatural ways. Jenny's mouth hung open in a terrible gaping hole, with long canines the size of small pencils hanging out over her lower lip, cutting it and sending two tiny trickles of blood dripping down. The sounds she uttered seemed to originate not from any definite material or temporal location but deep within some foaming stygian pit, and it sounded like a bow fretting the same untuned string on a violin. But as disturbing as the body itself was, the blood-soaked vomit and shit that covered everything--the floor, the tiles, the toilet, the bathtub--well, I needent go into details. Suffice it to say that what looked like a liver was floating in a red, bubbling pool of gastric acid in the sink, and there was more of that if you so desired.

Tara absolutely loathed the pity that she felt for the pathetic creature before her--this creature with whom she shared a sliver of one of her lives with. It certainly was no longer The Amazing Jenny--to be frank, the moment the young woman graced another woman's nipple with her breath she stopped being The Amazing Jenny to the witch. But what the pale, twitching figure huddled before her on the bathroom floor would imminently become--

What to do? Kill her *now*? Kill her now and put her out of her misery, kill her now and perhaps somehow rescue her soul? Kill her now--and prevent future death and infection?

The witch turned around and looked at the Happy Girl painting on the wall behind her. It was all starting to hit her, it was about ready to clobber her, and she damned those emotions that waxed inconsistent with her new form.

The tall, short-haired woman disappeared into the kitchen, took out a fresh razor blade from a box under the sink, went back inside the bathroom, and bled over Jenny's mouth. Then, her awakening emotion blurring from pity and sorrow to rage, she left the apartment to kill Rache.

*** *** ***

The Scarlet Moon had a metal door painted the color of strawberries and nothing but brick and a pink neon sign of the name with a circle around it where a storefront or window should be. It was Rache's goal to make the bar as vamp-friendly as possible, and that of course precluded windows, which vampires hated. The red-haired vampire had changed a lot since the massacre at The Rusty Nail--money can always do that to you so much quicker and permanently than long-term analysis. She had members of Caress pick clean the wallets and jewelry of the dead, ashy revelers that night, and utilized the two or three hackers in her clan to transfer money from bank accounts and credit cards and to cash in stock options. Watching them work on their stolen laptops, the vampire had acquired a new respect for the tools of the Establishment she once scorned; and she resolved to utilize those tools to the maximum of their plasticity in the building of her new empire.

And the Scarlet Moon, though on the surface it seemed like just another trendy nightclub in the Village, was going to be an integral part of that Caress Empire. Because, through Scarlet Moon--through its legitimacy and popularity--she hoped to attract humans from more affluent, even influential walks of life, and in so doing turning them and increasing the value of her bank of unsouls in Caress. As she learned from her Anthony Robbins seminar tapes--network network network.

On that late Friday night her *kin* and *childe* worked diligently on the final details of the establishment left undone, polishing the pink-and-red marbled floors and installing the delicate red light fixtures imported from Switzerland that hung en masse from the ceiling like hundreds of drops of blood. On the wall opposite the glass-and-neon bar was The Amazing Jenny's mural: it was mostly finished but for the pencil outlines of several persons like ghosts lost within a warm palette. Unlike her Happy Girl work, the figures depicted in the mural were hyper-realistic, angular, possessing sinews and bones sharply defined, faces and irises so heavily lined, mouths in which every tooth was visible, manes of hair in which every strand was delineated, thousands of strands swirling...it was beautiful, yes, even voluptuous, in its way, but also as grotesque as Grosz

illustrations for the Inferno. And the bodies in the painting appeared to be locked into some sort of conga line that trampled and doubled up upon itself, filling the plaster wall with 20-30 dancers, all of them tangled, all of them doubled-up in some way and confused--it was difficult to even trace which limb belonged to each person--and the overall impression one got from it all was that they were either having an orgy or being smushed into paste by some unseen hand.

Rache thought it looked like an orgy.

She was sitting in a booth upholstered with red sparkly vinyl, a delicate light that looked like a pink-and-crimson explosion hanging above and casting light on the motley assemblage of receipts and invoices she had spread out before her. The vampire was dressed in a tailored suit of elegance befitting the proprietress of a chic Downtown nightclub--dark red leather, almost the shade of dried blood, cut and sewn to fit her ample curves in a smart jacket and flared slacks. Her fire-engine red hair was pulled up and fastened into a tight, heavy bun on the top of her head by a golden cage with a long, sharp, pin in the shape of a rubied dragonfly, and her round face flawlessly painted and protected with some of the pilfered Dermaco products, burnt-orange eyeshadow providing a dramatic but not unflattering corona over her blue eyes. The proper application of makeup, not unlike the keeping of the Scarlet Moon's books, was an act of responsibility and maturity that the vampire took to quite readily, once the money was in place and she felt she could see her true destiny.

All around her Caress members, nattily dressed like jitterbugging khaki-clad twentysomethings on a Gap television ad and as blandly bohemian and multicultural as images on a Benetton shopping bag, worked on the finishing touches to the club. Rache loved to hear the hum of their carpentry equipment and the murmur of faithful employees hard at work, it was comforting, like keeping a television on when you're alone, when you're not even watching it--

There was a knock on the steel door.

"Devi, will you get that, please," Rache said in a bored voice, not even looking up from her paperwork. "It's probably Phillippe and Kendra with the new faucets."

The brown-skinned man with the curly bleached hair and the Diesel shirt obediently dropped his sandpaper and walked towards the door. He squinted at the convex figure in the peephole's sight, unable to recognize the short-haired woman in black.

"Yes? Do you know the password?"

Suddenly the image went dark, followed by a finger bursting through the glass and stabbing into the vampire's eye.

"Ai!" Devi screamed, stumbling back and cradling his bleeding face. Rache immediately exited the booth and jumped over the bar, and the other vampires stopped their activities and watched dumbstruck as a force blew the door open with a bang. The clan-leader's blue eyes first widened, then narrowed into hate-filled slits as the witch entered the Scarlet Moon.

Tara pointed at Rache.

"I've been waiting a *long time* to..."

The red-haired vampire whipped out an AK-47 from under the counter and shot and shot at the woman until she fell and kept shooting until the body was smoking and no longer moved.

"Get rid of this idiot," Rache barked, replacing the weapon in its spot amongst the limes and glasses. She stepped out from behind the low swinging door and went back to the red booth to resume her book-keeping.

*** *** ***

Vampires, as a rule, see an awful lot of nasty stuff, but the ones who were in charge of the intruder's corpse winced in disgust at the mutilated display before them. Not only had the machine gun's bullets tore bloody divots out of Tara's torso and nearly ripped the hand she had only minutes before used to point with into hamburger, but the entire left side of her face, including her eye, was shredded, exposing the bone and teeth beneath.

The mustachioed vampire in a yellow Old Navy utility vest who was crouched over the body frowned and turned to a colleague,

"Do we have any rubber gloves in here?"

"Hmm, I'll check in the pantry...look how that blood is *steaming*!"

"Like, I *know!*" He made a rumpled-up face as if smelling a fart. "I'm not putting *that* in my mouth or on my hands."

"You said it, brutha."

And nobody, not even the vampire so close to her with the yellow utility vest, noticed the tiny squirming black worm-like things that were gradually rebuilding her tissue, and by the time the disposal team's attention returned to her, their gloved hands holding meat cleavers and trash-bags, her face had been almost completely knitted back together with nary a scar to show for it. Then her eyes flew open.

"Hi," she said perkily, flashing her finest Dermaco smile, then telekinetically manipulated the two to hack at their own necks with the cleavers.

Rache hadn't a chance to get back to her weapon stash or even move an inch from where she was--the witch hurled all her magicks at the vampire and sent her flying up into the air and crashing back-first into the ceiling, impaling her on the light-fixture and keeping her pinned there helpless like an insect specimen.

Tara cleaned her throat.

"Now as I was saying: I've waited a *long time* to do this! Any last words before you die?"

Rache fought within herself to quell the spitting rage she felt, knowing it would only hinder her chances of getting out of this. Actually, her finely-tuned leadership and management skills told her that she was pretty much fucked, seeing as she emptied a substantial amount of lead into the woman and she was no longer bleeding. But the witch, from what she remembered, was the type who liked to jibber-jabber nonsensically on one point or another as if anybody cared; so if she could just keep her talking...

"What's the matter, why are you *doing* this, Tammy?" the vampire asked as her body instinctually squirmed vainly on the ceiling.

"IT'S TARA!" the witch screamed back. "And you're DEAD! *That's* what's

the matter!"

"Why? Because I shot you? You broke into my club, mutilated a clan member--what did you *expect* me to do? Don't you think this is kind of unreasonable, this mindset of yours?"

Tara raised her arms up at the sides and floated into the air so she could stare right into the bitch's face.

"*Unreasonable*?! Your whole EXISTENCE is unreasonable! What you do to people--how you *prey* upon them--is unreasonable!"

"And so you're hired as the Avenger for all my so-called crimes?"

The tall, short-haired woman considered Rache's question for a second, then nodded with a manic smile.

"Actually--yes! I am..."

"And who gave you that job? *Christ*? Is that who gave you that power?"

The witch's body changed its axis horizontally, rotated in the air 180 degrees, and effortlessly, as if floating in space, moved under Rache's body so the two were face-to-face; each woman could smell an odor patently unpleasant coming off the other, and turned their heads slightly away in reaction to it.

"Where I get my power is none of your concern!"

"I'll bet you got it from the same place *we* come from," the vampire sneered back. "I'll bet where you are now and where I have been for so long are pretty goddamn *compatible*--huh?"

"I'M NOT A KILLER LIKE YOU!"

"THEN WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!"

"YOU FUCKED MY GIRLFRIEND!!!"

The red-head was stunned. She almost forgot about her current predicament and sloppily stifled a laugh.

"*That's* why you're here?"

"It isn't funny," Tara growled, magickally applying more pressure on Rache's body so that thick, dark cracks cobwebbed out from under her.

"You're going to kill me over some...*cunt* who cheated on you? You say you're not a killer but that you're going to kill me anyway over *that*?! Haha...if

that's what it takes to break you, honey--good luck with the world!"

"SHUT-UP!"

"Why the fuck should I? You're going to kill me *anyhow*, right? You're going to kill me-- because there's nothing worse than getting betrayed in the sack, right? You're still hung up on that shit..."

"I'm killing you for *many* reasons! I'm killing you because it's..." The witch's voice dropped an octave. "...it's *my* fault you became what you are..."

"What the fuck are you babbling about?"

"The sachet...*remember*? Back in Marta's pad? The bloody ritual? To give you *power*?"

The vampire's face soured into an expression of disdainful confusion.

"Wha? What? That *rag* you gave me? Are you *serious*?"

"You *know* it had power, Rache--you know it had my *blood* over it..."

"And who are *you*? What blood, from the wounds of the Messiah? That dumb smelly thing? I'll admit--I believed in it for a while. But guess what? I grew up. I grew out of it. I moved on. I threw it out. And I still succeeded, I had the biggest haul of my entire life after I dumped that piece of shit in the nearest trash can. I didn't need you. Who the hell are you?" She let out a strangely girlish chuckle. "You've been walking around thinking you were responsible for *me*? You know what your problem is, Tammy?" Rache looked at the witch with equal parts spite and pity. "You're in a *dreamworld*."

Tara grabbed her by the throat and pulled her close.

"I--am--not--in--a--DREAMWORLD!!!"

Then Rache blasted up and out of the ceiling, through the second-floor apartment, through the roof, and kept going, like a streak up out into the sky, until it was as if she never was.

"And the name's *Tara*," the witch said to the gaping hole where the vampire used to be, plumbing hanging out of it like a dick in loose underwear. She shifted her axis again and turned back to the few vamps that were left in the Scarlet Moon, cowering in the back by the restrooms and pay telephone. The Indian, Devi, who had stuck a bar-napkin with the Guinness Logo into his eye-

socket to stop the bleeding, asked,

"But...where is Rache? Where did she go?"

The witch grinned.

"Where did she go? To the *Sun*, of course. She went to the Sun."

And then she lifted her arms and casually flew out of the ceiling.

*** *** ***

When Tara arrived back at the apartment it was clean and spotless and The Amazing Jenny, who apparently had made a full recovery, waited for her at the front door dressed in a breezy floral shift and a wide, closed-mouth smile. It was the latest of a series of incongruities that beset the witch's perception ever since she embraced her lover and felt no heart-beat under her flesh. And though she was now more powerful than she had ever been in her life--indeed, more powerful than just about a very large amount of people--her reality, her sense of identity, it took a hit, it took a serious near-fatal hit, and now it all (more all the time) had the look of a grainy 70's Italian horror movie.

And yet Jenny--she seemed so *clean*, so inviting...

She had swept up the broken idols off the floor, had rubbed away the red pentagram so that all that remained of it was just some faint residue in the fiber of the wood and the spaces between the floor boards. The food trays were neatly folded up and the broken dishes and spilt food in the kitchen had vanished, and even the tiny bits of the witch's milky vomit was picked away from the drain of the sink. And looking at the bathroom--it was as if the gory scene that took place hours ago had never been, the tiles and basins smelling of lemon cleaner and wisteria.

And Jenny, she seemed so *clean*.

"Do you like it," the short dark-haired woman asked.

The witch nodded wordlessly, and let her partner curl her pale cold hand around her bicep and lead her to their bed.

*** *** ***

Fucking a vampire?

Yes, Tara assumed that's what it was. She glanced over to The Amazing Jenny's sleeping head on her shoulder, soft white lids fringed in lush black closed and pink mouth seeming to smile even in rest. Fucking a vampire—so *what*? What did it matter, other than a cold clit?

Maybe this was the way things were meant to be.

With her new powers, and Jenny's "condition."

Maybe there was a purpose to it.

Maybe with Rache's death, things would finally be good now. Maybe performing the act of slaying the Beast, it set Tara free in some way, like Hercules and his tasks, like the Hero's journey, it was fulfilled and finally over.

The witch began to hate herself for how she initially scorned her lover. Sure, Jenny had slept with Rache--but as Rache herself pointed out (before magickally being sent to the center of the Sun), such things were common-place. Was it worth throwing everything away for? Jenny said they were a committed couple?--didn't "committed" imply (well, it implied the freakin' funny farm, but besides that) weathering all sorts of storms and crises together? Including *vampirism*?

And what was "vampirism," anyway?

Who defined that?

*** *** ***

At roughly 6:00 in the morning, when both Tara and Jenny were both fast asleep (actually, they were each pretending to be asleep for the benefit of the other, for their bodies had changed much over the last 12 hours), a series of alarms pierced the air from outside their window--and unlike the ones that were part of the usual white noise of the City, the ones that gradually got louder as they approached and gradually got softer as they drove by and out of sight, these

alarms simply reached the height of their volume and remained that way. And though the witch tried to ignore them, at some point--ten, fifteen minutes later--it became apparent that they were not going away. The witch pulled a bathrobe over her naked body and peered through the blinds. There were cop cars and ambulances parked and double-parked all the way up the block, with men and women in their blue suits buzzing like ants in and out of the building. Then the bodies started to get wheeled out. Noting the number and size of the bodybags Tara figured it was all from one family; a couple of adults and some children.

The witch crushed some of the white plastic strips from the blinds between her fingers and then looked at her partner. She was lying there, naked and on her side, awake, expressionless, her large blue eyes like glass.

"D'you do it?" the tall short-haired woman asked.

Jenny scratched her elbow and asked casually:

"Do what?"

"DON'T FUCKING LIE TO ME ABOUT THIS," the witch screamed, using her magicks to push the young woman's body across and out the bed and make her stand in front of her. Jenny emitted a throaty hiss, her face snapping into instinctual vampire mode. Tara continued,

"And don't you fucking spit and snarl at me either--what I did to your little 'girlfriend' I can do to you too!"

At the mention of Rache Jenny's round, broad face fell in concern.

"Y-you--you *killed* her?" She suddenly got angry and gave the witch a disgusted, half-hearted punch on her bare gray shoulder. "You *bitch*! You told me you wouldn't!"

"Oh, so *sorry*--did I hurt your feelings with that too? I can understand how *broken up* you'd be about it, how much you'll miss that ray of sunshine..." Tara grinned sardonically. "...and now she really *is* sunshine!"

"W-what are you *talking* about? And why...You're *gray*, Tara, you're completely gray, do you *know* that? What's happening to you?"

"Gray?" The tall woman regarded her hands. "Oh, yes, I do seem a little, around the edges. Oh well. Matches with anything, you know: red, black,

white...As to what's *wrong* with me..." She grabbed Jenny roughly by the chin, forcing her mouth to open and her fangs to stick out. "...there's a whole bunch of dead people being carted away from our building, and I think you know what happened to them! Am I right?"

Jenny tore herself away from her lover's grasp and plunked down on the bed, pouting and beginning the waterworks.

"Aren't you happy at *all* that I cleaned this house so nice?! After you destroyed all those pretty goddesses we had picked out together? After I was so *sick*?" She wiped some reddish snot away from her nose with a corner of bedsheet. "Look--maybe we've...both *changed*, you know? But I still think we can make it, if we make an effort. It can be like things always were...only, only we'll just have to make a few *adjustments*, that's all."

The little woman took the reluctant witch's hand and gently pulled her over to sit on the bed next to her. She continued to talk, some of that old sparkle in her fringed blue eyes as she did so.

"Don't you see? We can still live. We'll just...I'll just drink blood from...from cats and stuff, you know--no more humans, I promise! And, and Rache said there's a special tanning lotion I can use, so I won't get burnt up in the daytime...she said that plenty of vampires live among regular human life every day! And--and I could be--one of the *good* vampires. Like in Anne Rice. You know? I--I *love* you, Tara..."

The witch looked back at the woman before her blankly, her face betraying none of the countless conflicted and tumultuous thoughts writhing in her head. Then her face softened and she smiled sheepishly.

"You know...I was thinking about it, and...maybe it *can* work."

"Of course it can..."

"I mean...you *did* kill those people, right?"

"Y-yes," The Amazing Jenny answered, bowing her head contritely.

"But...I guess you *needed* to do it...you were very sick. You probably would have died and they were close by--they were the ones downstairs near the elevator, right? The Jacobsons?--you did what you had to do. And you did say

just now you'd never do it again, so...there's nothing to worry about, I guess."

Jenny nodded enthusiastically and took her lover's hands in her own.

"I'm so *glad* you understand! It's...it's such a weight off my mind! I thought you weren't going to love me anymore!"

"No..." Tara stretched her two gray arms out and embraced her partner tenderly. "I'd *never* stop loving you, baby..."

"And we can have a wonderful life...we can get that little farm Upstate like we always wanted..."

"Sure, anything you want, Jen..."

"I saw some great pictures in a magazine I want to show you... Oh, it's going to be *wonderful!*"

"It is..."

And the witch magickally willed a tiny, microscopic fragment of wood left over from the ritual that Jenny's broom had missed, she willed it to travel very fast but imperceptible in the air like pollen, and enter her lover's back, and lodge itself in her heart.

*** *** ***

This world--this dirty, lurid world--

Tara went into the bathroom and started running warm water into the tub, forgoing her ability to just turn it on and regulate it using her mind in favor of savoring the feel of the cold chrome in her hand, and from the chrome falling into the hot, refreshing stream of the water itself.

This dirty, lurid world--

She put the rubber stopper on the drain and knelt down, watched the water rise, occasionally strumming her fingers in it.

Hands, always hands--

Then she grabbed the razor blade she had used on Jenny the night before from the edge of the sink, shut off the water, and climbed into the tub.

And always the question of the intention of those hands--to greet me or to stab me?

Tara Amadeo cut the undersides of her arms from the wrists to her elbows and immediately plunged them into the water. She closed her eyes, could hear the hum and hiss of her essence bubbling away.

--instead of this, I prefer no more hands. This dirty, lurid world. I want no more part of it.

And the witch was still.

DESTROYER
OR
WHAT TO DO WHEN THE KOOKS TURN OUT
TO BE RIGHT

And the witch was agitated.

Her eyes remained closed, but the persistence of her consciousness within her material form sorely vexed her.

Why wasn't she dead?

Her lids flew open and her mouth soon followed, her lower jaw lurching down and spasming in a verbally unexpressed horror at the sight that greeted her return.

Instead of the pool of red she expected, a thick, fetid black sludge covered the surface of the water, only her knees and the tops of her breasts and her head sticking out of it. It looked as if she had been bathing in crude oil. And it stunk like *shit!*

Tara leapt to her feet and examined her wrists.

Healed. Not even a fucking scar for the memory.

A terrible idea began to knead into her thoughts, and she shivered calf-deep in the muck, black slime dripping down from her body in gloppy portions and plunging back into the soup. She shivered, and thought:

No...no fucking way...

The tall brunette grabbed the razor blade and stumbled out of the bathtub and in front of the medicine cabinet mirror.

No...

She took a lock of hair from her slightly overgrown bangs, stretched it out, and hacked it off after several tries with the blade. After about thirty seconds, the strands grew back, like a cartoon.

This is like a fucking cartoon...

Everything became incredibly still in Tara--in the apartment, in the world.

The witch's consciousness kept trying to squirm away from It--the startling, nauseating new twist to the already unbearable situation--like a girl from "Georgy Porgy" avoiding her unwanted suitor's kiss.

Like a cartoon...it's not even real...

Tara used the blade to trace a fine cut from the outer corner of her left eye to the bottom of her mouth, then, before the black blood had a chance to do more than bead delicately, watched the line she produced fade away, be erased by some unseen hand.

"Huh."

The woman suddenly went berserk and striped herself to ribbons with the razor, going over and over and over with it and screaming and moving faster than any human or vampire would be able, almost as if she had multiple arms performing the procedure. Exploding her eye, cutting off the tip of her nose and nipples, ripping a gash in her abdomen and going overoverover it until the glistening organs peeked through, all limbs and all skin striped black with the razor, falling on her back and moving almost at the speed of light, going overoverover it all with the blade--

--and everything healing only seconds behind.

I'm dead.

Friday...was a good day to die. So Molly was right. That cockeyed looney bitch--she was *right!*

And I'm dead. And my body...it's filled up...with shit.

"Huhuhuhuhuhuh..."

Tara dug her nails into her short hair and howled.

*** *** ***

There is only so much one can do. Especially if you're immortal. At some time, you have to get over it. Because what're you gonna do? You can't off yourself. You're stuck. But, to look at the bright side of things,

You're really goddamn powerful.

And you know that at some point, if you just live long enough, the years will harden you until it will all just be significantly less than a memory--that is, if what is inside of you, *growing*, doesn't rise up and make the process go much faster.

The realization that she had so thoroughly, permanently fucked things and damned herself shocked Tara into a grim, emotionless rationality that enabled her to do what, as her rational mind dictated, was the logical next step. She had thought that next step was suicide. But apparently that was impossible. Because she was, at least in some very significant if wholly obscene sense, *dead*. She died the day before, on Friday, either at the end of Rache's bullets or even before, during the ritual itself. She fucked up. She really fucked up. She knew this. That mortal, potentially corruptible body she had originally possessed had been transformed into an immortal, profoundly corrupted one. And sometime between last night and this morning her skin settled into a pale gray.

Like rotting meat.

But she was really goddamn powerful, did I forget to mention? If she wanted to, she could tune in her magicks to any place at any time and just feel that incredible necromantic power--but to what end?

Bringing back Jenny from the dead? As what? And how could she bring her back using that black gift and not further corrupt and damn her in some way? What abilities the witch possessed now, she knew intuitively that they were not for miracles.

And were there any enemies left to kill? Any wrongs left to avenge, any grudges? Any purpose?

And what was it all leading to? What was she becoming? Because whatever the specific results of the Back In Black ritual, she was certain that it was not a static thing. She was changing. Her body was changing, ever since yesterday night. And her mind?

She found it hard to maintain her grief over The Amazing Jenny. It was hard for her to even retain the memories, to have the ability to feel anything over the replay of their life together in her mind. And maybe that was for the best.

Because Tara's new existence--it was incompatible with such dysfunctional sentimentalities. It was like a human crying over an ill-remembered experience from some television show viewed at the age of 5.

It was all just so *unreal*. And there was something growing inside of her--maybe it was just a new set of beliefs, or maybe something far more material. But it was growing--and it was very very Dark.

Tara had done a terrible, terrible thing. She fucked up. She knew this. You didn't have to tell her. She knew.

*** *** ***

Vanish.

That was the only thing left to do. And with her new abilities, she could be pretty goddamn *thorough* about it, too.

She started by erasing her name from the lease that was folded neatly in half and located midway within a stack of papers in a box labeled "miscellaneous." She erased the name by thinking about it. It wasn't even a matter of *erasing*--it simply was no longer there, as if the very reality of her ever having anything to do with the document was altered. And in similar fashions did her name disappear from every document and scrap of paper in the apartment. And likewise did she omit her visage from every photograph, effortlessly editing pictures that boasted her with Jenny, and likewise did she erase the memory of herself from every mind that ever knew her in the building, from the thoughts of every person that ever knew Tara in that particular era of her life, who knew her as a would-be patron of the arts and writer, who knew her as this friendly-enough, agreeable creature.

And the witch did not simply accomplish this to make her exit clean, to obliterate any loose ends in a patently non-violent manner. She did not simply do all this for those reasons of self-protection and practicality, this omitting and disappearing she did with her mind. She did it because she considered herself a literal contaminant. She did it to spare others even the contemplation.

After pulling a sheet over Jenny's head, kissing the cold linen that rested on her brow, Tara set to pouring through her grimoires and selecting the most significant to place in a rough brown leather backpack. She detected the materialization of Roy behind her in the room almost as soon as it occurred, or some seconds before, and neither interrupted one second of her task nor turned around in order to address him:

"Are they *happy* now?"

"Happiness is a human concept," he replied.

"So I'm beginning to see. Did they know this was going to happen?"

"What, specifically?"

Tara slammed a black, hide-bound volume on the table and spun around at Roy in sputtering fury, pointing at her face.

"*THIS!* Did they know that this was going to happen, that I'd have skin the color of dirty snow?--or that my girlfriend would turn into a bloodsucker and eat the neighbors, were the Nine aware of this beforehand?! HUH?!"

The very fact that the tall, intimidating-of-appearance No-Man flinched at the sight of the witch's pale gray face was most disheartening to her, for it could only foretell bad things to follow.

"The Nine fully consider the notion of 'free will' to be quite vali..."

"'Free will' my ass! If they could see far enough into the future to tell me to kill Rache or 'else,' they saw the rest of it! I was a fucking *patsy*!" She poked her gray finger at Roy's chest, and he winced as he felt it burn. "I'm a dupe! And now that it's over, now that she's dead--I want to know if they're HAPPY! I want to know. And I want to know what I get out of it! What do I get?! HUH?!!"

The large, dark man swallowed back some necromantic bile that was coagulating in his throat.

"You get...nothing. Nothing, I'm afraid."

The witch's red-rimmed eyes twinkled dangerously. She gave Roy a hearty slap on the back, nearly knocking him flat over.

"That's what I like about you, Roy-Boy--your motherfucking honesty. You gotta love it! Really!" She turned back to her grimoires. "So is this a social call or

do you have some new portent of doom to spout out and worry me needlessly with?"

"The latter," he replied without irony.

"Spill it. I don't see how *worse* it could get, anyway.'

"You are now your Universe's porthole to Hell. No-Men across the eastern seaboard have been activated. The Nine track your every movement upon the glassy surface of a giant sea-green dual-irised eyeball plucked from the dragon Tiamat. The infernal hordes stamp their cloven hooves and tentacles in glee at the upcoming Apocalypse while listening to Wagner. We are indeed at the very threshold of the End, unless your destruction is achieved before the seeding of the Earth with your devil-spawn nascent within your belly."

Tara found it hard to counter all of the preceding with a smart-ass remark on the level of "Al Jaffee's Snappy Answers To Stupid Questions." Wasn't a question, anyway. More like a statement. No, *definitely* a statement. Shit.

"Oh *really*?"

"Yes. Really."

"So why don't you just *do* it? Blow my head off with that fine-looking equipment I know you got stashed under your coat."

"I cannot. Only one who truly cares about you can slay you now."

"I see." The witch turned away from him as she put her finger to her gray lips in thought for a second. "Wait--did you just diss me?"

But he was gone, and the apartment grew far stiller and sepulchrelike for the change, which was saying a lot, considering Roy himself was a reanimated corpse. Tara put the last of the books and papers into her bag and popped the rest of them out of existence. After a brief interior debate as to whether she should fly out the window or take the elevator, she settled on simply...vanishing.

*** *** ***

Lucy Holloway and her partner Steph lived in the one-bedroom above Hedgewich, in a space directly adjacent to a funeral parlor and where a

passenger plane crashed in 1960. The rather morbid pedigree of her immediate neighborhood didn't really faze the middle aged, auburn-haired woman, because the dead, to some extent, were clean, at least in certain circumstances--a proper burial, for instance, accompanied by the hymns and homilies of one's choice. And to Lucy, the sudden catastrophic event, despite the obvious tragedy and terribleness, had a certain purifying quality about it, as if the souls themselves immediately shot out of the bodies upon impact and embarked on a one-way ticket to Nirvana. It was not those brands of Dead that one truly had anything to worry about beyond a simple Shade floating down one's staircase for a habitual afternoon tea.

No, as Lucy had advised many a time in her role of local Earth Mother/Shamaness--the Dead were nothing to be afraid of.

Unless they were Unclean.

The woman's eyes flew open with a start, revealing the one good one and the one sightless. The heavy, steady rush of air from Steph's snore alighted and withdrew from the side of her face, alighted and withdrew, and a gaily patterned Indian textile covered the both of them.

Alight and withdraw, alight and withdraw...

What...was...that...thing?, Lucy thought in alarm, thought in reaction to the sudden horrible feeling she got in the pit of her stomach. And that feeling was not physical in nature but spiritual, it was like an inky drop of foulness had fell up from some deep well of evil and stained her immortal soul--

Then she realized that Tara was staring down at her from the ceiling.

"Whaaaagh!!! Waaaugh-arrghhh!!!!"

The gray witch couldn't help but checkle at the older woman's shrieks, how she screamed in a high, drawn-out pitch that would have sounded more at home coming out of the mouth of a teenager than a lady in her late 40s. And the way Steph--that big, dykey-haired lumox--flopped like a fish on the mattress at the sound of her partner's cry, at first bewildered and simply attempting to calm the woman lying next to her down, then, being apprised of the situation, reaching for the baseball bat she kept under the bed...

“She’s stuck on there like a gol-damn Spiderman or something,” the big woman in the buzz-cut mullet and the unlicensed Calvin “Every Day Someone Does Something To Piss Me Off” T-shirt reported as she stood on the bed and tried to pry the witch off the ceiling with the bat. “Pumpkin Pie? Are you okay?”

But Pumpkin Pie, lying on the bed with a death-grip on the Indian coverlet, was *not* okay. She was utterly, profoundly horrified. *That--that was not* Tara Amadeo. Oh sure, *parts* of her--physical and spiritual--were still there, recognizable enough. But those original bits, bits of Tara, were surrounded and nearly subsumed by this...Thing. What *was* that Thing? Watching the slapstick between her partner and the witch in the dim glow of the street lamps outside, like shadow puppets...and the presence of the Thing, the Thing that was now in her house, the Thing that, despite Lucy’s generous open-hearted nature and any concern she might have for Tara as a person, drove the older lady to desire nothing but getting the Thing, the Evil, out of her house--

Would *Lucy Holloway* turn away a person in need at her front door?

N--nnyes. Yes, in this case, yes.

Throw It out. Cast that Thing away before the contagion spreads further...and yet...

She knew intuitively, knew in a way that made her heart sink in despair--that to speak to the witch and find out what happened to her was indeed very, very *important*, and that there was no way out of it, it was Lucy’s destiny, Lucy’s destiny as she, in those few seconds, realized that everybody had Destinies to fulfill, Destinies unbreakable and inviolate.

The auburn-haired woman coaxed her left hand off the coverlet and resumed the death’s grip on Steph’s unshaven calf.

“S-Steph,” she croaked. “Steph, let’s just have some tea. L-lets--all *three* of us--have some tea. Would you like some tea, Tara?”

And in the next instant they were all sitting around the kitchen table, Tara elegantly holding a Japanese-style white-and-teal teapot in her hand and pouring it over Lucy’s cup.

“Sure, we can have tea,” the witch said with a smile meant to be

hospitable; as Steph, so disoriented by the instantaneous materialization, put her hand to her mouth to stem the flow of vomit and ran out of the room.

*** *** ***

Lucy, all gooseflesh and shivers under her plain cotton floral pajamas, stuck a couple of shaky fingers into the sugar bowl and caught and lost a couple of cubes, caught and lost, caught and lost...

“So Tara--I’m probably going out on a limb here, but I’m guessing you have aquired a few more magicks since the last time we chatted?”

“Right you are, Kreskin,” the gray-skinned witch answerd mock-cheerfully, clinking her teacup to Lucy’s and throwing it over her shoulder.

“How...”

“A *lot*’s happened since our last...*chat*. Lucy. Lucy.” Tara looked around the room, noting the clock on the wall with no arms. “Funny how all these goddamn kitchens look the same,” she said as an aside.

Lucy dropped the cubes in the warm liquid, trying to remember, trying to block out the Thing in disguise in front of her.

“The last time...you were upset about that man dying? You were thinking of giving up the magick? Right?”

“Yes again! Right. Well. *Obviously*, that whole plan didn’t quite come off. Though I tried-really, I did. Packed it all away, sprinkled the requisite hyssop and sage and did my purification bit. Cleaned up my act. Even got a girlfriend.”

“Oh, that’s *nice*,” Lucy answered, her one good eye brightening.

“She’s dead now.”

“Oh.”

“She turned into a vampire and ate the Jacobsons. So I had to stake her. Actually, I toothpicked her.” The witch idly levitated the sugar bowl a foot off the table. “It was *bloodless*, really. But somewhere along the way I...”

“Did you do any spells?”

Tara set the bowl down and clasped her hands togther like an excited

schoolgirl.

“The *biggest!* It made the Babylon Working look like a \$7 love spell. It was so damn cool...you know, until *this* happened.”

“And what is ‘this’?”

“This? It’s the bloody end of the world, is what it is.”

And Lucy Holloway rested her hands palms-up on the table uselessly and started to softly cry. Because she knew it was true.

“Aw, don’t feel *bad*, Lucy...everything has an end.”

The older woman slammed her right hand into the table, her good blue eye blazing.

“THAT’S NOT AN ANSWER, TARA! That’s not an answer for *anything*. How can this be *stopped*--there has to be a way...”

The humor drained out of the gray-skinned lady’s face.

“It stops when I die.”

“That’s not an answer either, Tara,” Lucy said in a wavering voice, unsure of her own response.

“Well I’m sorry you don’t like the answers I’m giving you. But that’s the situation at this point. Life ain’t all incense and scented candles, Luce.”

The room grew silent, the only sound that of Steph in the bathroom retching air over the toilet. Then Tara slowly got up, pushed her chair back with an excruciating nails-on-blackboard screech, and leaned against the white sink jauntily.

“Did I ever tell you the story about Terry Aprille? Wait, don’t answer that--I know I haven’t. Just fuckin’ with ya. Anyway. Terry Aprille is the creator of the movie character The Sweet Hereafter. Certainly you’ve heard of the Sweet Hereafter?”

Lucy squinted her good eye and shook her head apologetically, half-seriously entertaining the notion that if she gave the wrong answer, perhaps the witch would get pissed and destroy the world.

“Um...I’ve heard of him vaguely, I think. It’s like a horror movie?”

“Gothic horror, to be precise. The Sweet Hereafter’s success put Terry on

the map. A shy, soft-spoken man, this new-found fame at first took him quite aback and unawares. Suddenly he was going out far more than he used to-- because people were inviting him to. People were suddenly interested in what he had to say, what was percolating in that mind of his, and they wanted *more*. But Terry didn't want to go down that road anymore. He had put that dark land behind him. He had written Sweet Hereafter during a particularly troubled part of his life, deposited his angst into it, and considered it Over. But it was not over. How *could* it have been over? How can you produce a document like that and dare dream it over? And so he got pulled back in, despite his best intentions. He got pulled back in again, against his will. But it was the Document. It was the Document that did him in. That fucking lurid Document."

Tara suddenly grabbed a knife from the dish rack.

"No!" Lucy hoarsely shouted, trying to get up but she couldn't get up, she couldn't get up because the witch was magickally pinning her to her seat.

"P-Pumpkin," Steph yodeled weakly from the bathroom. "Everything ok in there?"

But now the paralysis extended even to the auburn-haired woman's vocal chords, speechless as Tara lay her left hand firmly against the beige Formica counter next to the sink and hacked it off at the wrist, sending a spray of black, thick blood shooting out of the stump like a water hose. The witch immediately picked up the severed member with her other hand and threw it over Lucy's head into the living room, where it landed with a dull rubbery thud.

"*I'm dead!*" the gray woman shouted, her brown eyes wide in conviction. "And yet..."

A dry, choking sound broke free deep within Lucy's throat as her good eyeball followed the path of the dismembered hand as it grew dozens of black inky tentacles that whipped out in long sticky strings onto the ceiling and the kitchen table, pulling itself along in jerky leaps and bounds upon its web until it found its way back to Tara's wrist. There was still black shit dripping and in chunky puddles in the hand's wake, and Lucy, suddenly released from her immobility, jumped out of her seat to avoid a particularly nasty gloppy portion

from falling on her head.

“And yet...” the witch continued, “...I cannot die. So I ask you, my dear acquaintance Lucy: do you *care* about me? (I know we don’t know each other very well, but I’m desperate.)”

The older woman had seen her share of the supernatural in her day, and had also seen her share of Evil. But this--this was on a level that far surpassed her ability to be open-minded. And the clock on the wall--where were the hands?! An electric shudder of fear ran from the center of her spine outwards throughout her torso and into her limbs. The End really did seem possible--for the first time, it really seemed possible.

And where was Steph?

“Oh, I put Step to bed,” Tara said in a bored, insolent voice, replacing the butcher knife in the dish rack and pulling out a long, pointed one from a slot in a wooden block instead. “Don’t worry, that’s not an euphemism for killing her, I really just put her to sleep, gently tilting her head so the residual puke doesn’t get caught in her throat but rather pours out gently onto your nice white tiled floor. I can’t brook her plucky interference right now...” She opened her fingers and let the knife gracefully float out from her palm, float out and somersault lazily (blade over handle, handle over blade) until it landed without a sound before Lucy on the table

*** *** ***

“No,” the older woman said.

“C’mon, c’mon, stop being a goddamned idealist about things. Sometimes life just sucks and smells like ass.”

“No.”

The witch lifted up her black shirt and let it rest right above her huge, gray breasts. On her abdomen was a scaly, raised circle about the diameter of a Coke bottle.

“C’mon, I got a *target* here and everything. You just *know* that whatever’s growing under that thing can’t be good. C’mon, save the world. Shove that shit in

the spot and just pull up. *End it.*"

Like a badly edited movie the knife suddenly appeared in Lucy's right hand, startling her.

"Ah! *Tara...*"

"Cut the crap, Lucy, and just *do it--c'mon...*" She put her hands behind her head, "...just do it. Just do it like *Nike*, baby, just *shove* that shit. Because if you don't--you like *kids* don't you? Kids and puppies and trees? Well, after the gates of Hell are opened, demons are going to sodomize all three. Even the fucking trees, in their squirrel-holes. I'm sure even a poofy Wicca *lovestheearth* like you knows about *demons*. Shit, you've been lecturing about them to me for *years!* You know what demons can do. So. It really behooves you to *shove* that shit and save the Universe. So. *Do it!*"

"Look, I'm sure if we go through some grimoires..."

"Been there. Done that. I looked at them all. All the grimoires. Everywhere. All at once. I'm fucked. Do it. *Shove* that shit."

Lucy was now standing directly in front of Tara--whether she did this on her own or by agent of the witch, she didn't know. She didn't know anything anymore, her reality was sinking like feet in deep mud, she wasn't sure of anything, not a thing she had been taught and not a thing that had ever been revealed to her in meditation, everything, it was all sinking in that black fetid shit that had come out of the witch's wrist, that liquid vile thing that was the Evil, that was evil made tangible and was the stuff that stained souls. But she *knew*--she *knew* she had to *kill* her.

Like Captain Kirk, she always thought she had some sort of humanist, essentially non-violent options at her disposal, but we all know that's not how life works, that the humanist options aren't always available, that to even proclaim "Humanist" is itself an insult to the non-humans.

Sometimes things do not play by our genteel humanist agenda.
Sometimes--

"I-I'm sorry, *Tara...*" the auburn-haired woman whispered as she raised the knife up to stab her, "...may the Goddess preserve your soul..."

But the witch immediately caught the blade between her two gray palms in an almost robotic fashion. Her eyes began to shine red as if there was a powerful battery inside her skull.

"You were *really* going to do it, weren't you?"

The witch punched her in the face, sending the older woman stumbling across a chair and unconscious to the floor. Then she fixed her fiery glance onto that damned handless clock on the wall, forcing it to melt like a Dali painting.

From the on-again, off-again, on-again journal of Molly Griep, cobbled together through a series of stolen hospital stationary, toilet paper, and her monthly looseleaf allotment.

It's going to happen soon! I feel almost a relief. I'm through being angry about it, about her, I'm through with worrying about this world. I stuck my neck out to protect this world, and what did it get me? The cunty ingrates put me in here. To hell with those fuckbags. If they don't believe, they don't deserve to be Saved. How can I shed any more tears for a world that doesn't want to believe, that just kicks my ass and kicks my ass and yells at me and laughs at me for my views? Why act out anymore? Why endure any more thorazine injections? In those science-fiction movies you see it all the time, the hero runs out in the road, in the public square, and tells them, and they won't believe. Even Jesus--why be crucified for these fuckbags? Stop doing things that are thankless; just pull up a chair and enjoy the show.

And honestly, I will enjoy watching all the non-believers in this place get swallowed up by the Rapture. The very expression on their

faces at the moment of the Revealing--maybe I will get no more joy in this world but that, but life is short, for all of us now.

And I know why I'm here.

I know why I'm here.

Because I tried to save this world.

I did my part.

And they can choose to disbelieve it.

But I know who I am. I know what I did and did not do.

They try to get me to see things Their way.

But They just don't understand. That my viewpoint is all I have left. I've been stripped naked of everything else in my life except my perspective. Personal perspective is key. Belief is all.

And sometimes, I'm not even in here.

*** *** ***

America-at-Large would view a fellow like the Reverend Rudolph S. White as somewhat of a kook, the Biblical passages and portentous proclamations that passed from his strangely sensual lips as being just so much alien blather. And not only would he be pegged as a kook, but probably as a charlatan as well. Another lacquered-haired con artist with a mellifluous voice. And would they be right? Or were they--the Non-Believers that Molly was going to bust her clit reveling over the destruction of--not even be in the same *reality* as someone like Rev. White and his followers, and were these two parties even living under the same sun? And is it even possible for there to be a second, or a third, or even an infinite number of realities and does such a condition throw the idea of One God or a universal Morality out the window? Or, if you find yourself in the reality that

Rev. White inhabited and thrived--would you not even be having this discussion?

And what happens when realities *leak*? What does America-at-Large *do* with Rev. White's demons?

He never made millions off his ministry, he never planned to--his mind was always Jesus, but not Jesus plain, but the JRR Tolkien version of Christianity. The religion, when viewed through that sort of kelidoscopic lens, provides hours and decades and minute-by-minute non-stop preoccupation. His was a world of angels and demons and blood. But due to the austerity of his particular Christian strain, not a speck of referral to the battle that was, it seemed, forever on the verge of happening was in evidence in the modest little Georgian shack he lived in by himself, a small, faded house hand-built by past Whites several generations ago. The discolored paintings on the walls, framed in dirty, rough wood, were not of the angels and saints but of non-descript pastoral scenes and relatives long-forgotten. Clots of knick-knacks fashioned from china or bone lined bookshelves and window sills and the 30-year-old RCA television set with the manual channel dial--but you would find no flaming head of a vengeful god or a beatification of Mary or even Archangel Michael squeezing the head of the devil amongst those dull-complexioned figurines. The only badges of Rev. White's faith were the silver cross above his bed and the black-bound Bible in his night table drawer.

And as the tall, gaunt man slept, he felt confident that the intervention of the Cross, the Book, and his Faith would protect him from unclean thoughts, the Devil, demons, and vampires. But demons and vampires are not the same, they operate under subtly different laws of supernature. Vampires burn out of a primal guilt. Demons are *beyond* the concept of Guilt, either of the conscious, unconscious, or vestigial higher-primate varieties. And so Demons are utterly beyond the concept of the Cross, and exorcisms effective only due to the will of the possessed, not to the flowery prose or the holy water or the prayers of any number of well-wishers. But Rev. White never really had an opportunity to test these theories, so all he had to go on were supposings and what influence and instruction he received from others during the years.

But now he had that opportunity.

Tara Amadeo, whose condition somewhat significantly worsened since the clobbering of poor Mrs. Lucy Holloway, had now reached a state in which her eyeballs were permanently red, her hands clawed, and her mind assaulted by something that could only be described as a “cacophony.” In her mind, it was like several infernal symphonies were being played all at once, but not yet clear enough that she could make out the melody. And she realized that the only thing stopping her from hearing the full music was *herself*, because to finally *hear* that music--to lend the interested parties her undivided attention--would be the end of *everything*.

But she couldn’t hold back forever. And as time passed (and though now an immortal, the sensation of time passing still effected her, just in a terribly disjointed, trapezoidal way), she felt pieces of herself float away--

And in her desperate clinging to her humainty, in her darkest moment yet as she fought to keep the music to a murmur, she saw one last, final ray of hope...

She remembered The Reverend S. White’s Blood Of The Lamb Hour.

For who is more powerful than Jesus?

And so she thought herself into his spare, dusty bedroom, preferring to work at night, and to watch the clean, quiet head of her Intended for a time and feel relaxed, and remember what it was to sleep...

And the sliver cross above his bed--she levitated over the sleeping man and touched the cross, and the light of her glowing red eyes reflected off the narrow metal surface and it didn’t burn, it didn’t trouble her, and she thought that was a bad sign, and she thought that was a bad sign.

For who is more powerful than Jesus?

And should she wake him now? That clean, sleeping head, those black, shiny curls...

The witch’s body, still clad in the finely-tailored but otherworldly black outfit she materialized by thought, carefully lowered in the air until she was nose-to-nose with the gently snoring man, and then she opened up her mouth--the interior of which, including her tongue, was pitch black--and licked him full on the

face from his forehead down the bridge of his nose and over his ips.

“*Mmmughuck!*” the Reverend exclaimed, the taste of bile seeping into his mouth and skin, burning from where he had been touched. Upon the sight of the demon before him his entire gangly body froze as if struck by the gorgon, only his right hand fidgeting frantically and blind into his nighttable drawer for the *Book*, the Book that he knew could save him--

Oh, it was such a frightening and exciting time for him!

Sure, it was obvious that some demon from Hades had come to tempt him and drown him into the bowels of the Styx if he should even the make the slightest hint of backsliding. But don’t you see what that meant?

Obviously, the End Times were fast at hand. And that meant. That he was *right*. That the Book was right. If the world ended and Satan’s crab-feet walked the Earth and hundreds of thousands of people died--well, of course that was a great *tragedy* and all--but that also meant He was coming back. He was coming back!

And the Reverend Rudolph S. White loved Jesus as much as any straight man could love another.

“Get thee behind me, Satan,” the man intoned as authoritatively as he could, his voice only cracking once, and his Bible held out to the witch’s face so that she could clearly discern the odor of the rich leather of its binding and think of the cover of the Spinal Tap record “Smell the Glove.”

She tilted her head and popped the book out of existence. Rev White’s newly-empty spatulate hand spasmed in desolation and confusion, and he let a quick but deep yelp fly from his mouth as if he was a small dog that had been trod upon.

“*My book!* Thou foul demon of Satan, what hadst thou done to...”

“*Look*--either I’m Satan or a foul demon of Satan. Make up your mind. The hallmark of effective leadership is *Consistency*.”

“*Ut...*”

He never considered facing the horde with out the Book in his hand. No, whenever he pictured it, he *always* had the Book. He always had the Book in his

hand, driving back the Legion, and perhaps quoting some Leviticus or something. But *this*--

It was a damned good thing he memorized the entire Bible by the time he was 23. Now what would be a good passage...

“If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand?”

Tara let her body fall gently upon the Rev’s long sinewy frame and began dry-humping him.

“I need some *advice*, Doc...”

“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

dryhumpdryhumpdryhump...

“I need some *help*--I feel as if something *evil* is growing inside of me--something *bigger* than I am..”

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory as praise!”

dryhumdryhumpdryhump...

A hardness formed between the tall gaunt man’s legs in spite of himself, but after such a long time living the ascetic life, the Rev. learned to disassociate himself from the temptations of the Loins of Satan, he learned to separate his mind from his body just as oil and water separates, and so skilled was he at this process that he felt no need to physically fight the short-haired crimson-eyed gray demoness that rubbed her unnatural warm body over his blanket-covered form. He just lay there and stoically took the dryhump as Jesus took the scourge, hoping that Scripture would sway this devilless’s heart in some way, that the Word’s power would drive the evil out.

“*Doc*,” the witch said pleadingly, grabbing him by the jowls and continuing to grind her infernal pelvis into the banana-sized swelling. “I’m not bullshitting you here--I--I **need** some help--I need...”

“I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a...”

“I CAN’T EVEN UNDERSTAND THAT! DON’T YOU GET IT? I DON’T NEED SOME BLASTED 2000-YEAR-OLD SEMETIC PARABLES TRANSLATED BY UPTIGHT BRITISH ASSHOLES RIGHT NOW I NEED SOME *HELP!!!* I’VE GOT THE FRICKING GATE TO HELL IN MY TUMMY!” She grabbed his turgid cock though the blanket with her clawlike hand. “Don’t you *get* it?! The *Apocalypse* is at hand!!!!”

They were the words the Reverend Rudolph S. White had fantasized about for so long, the words he said so often in his televised sermons but always had the secret fear that it was merely a fantasy, that the beyond-horrible suspicion that he might have been kidding himself all this time--

But no. It was here. It was *really* here.

He grabbed her heated ass lustfully.

“My dear, of *course* it is,” the Reverend said with an intoxicated near-tearful look of excitement in his eyes. “Of course it is--it has been *prophesized!* The *End* is almost upon us! It is the way things were *meant* to be!” The witch felt herself getting sucked into the reality of his earnest, dilated pupils, felt herself getting sucked in because for the first time since she turned into this Thing she didn’t face resistance to it, didn’t face the denial that had plagued even herself about the condition...in her gut she *knew* that it truly was the *Apocalypse*, that she was just a gear in a Cosmic End Game that was inevitable and unstoppable--and that it was nothing to be *ashamed* about, it was just the way things *were*. The church-man only *confirmed* it, affirmed it, and though technically they were on opposite sides, the comprehension of what she was and what she had to do and what was to happen drew her closer to him.

And they fucked, and the Rev. White was of two minds as regards to the fucking, one being that it was such a damn fine *release*, the blowing of his wad--this was of the lower mind, of course, the mind that was situated somewhere in the back there, that he wasn’t responsible for, the one which all he had to do was try his hardest to suppress and then it was out of his jurisdiction--and the other mind, the Higher Mind, it was focused on only one thing, one Joyful thing, and that was of course the immanent arrival of the Savior. And what a sight that

would be! And what a sight that would be!

*** *** ***

Tara Amadeo left the Reverend Rudolph S. White wet in his bed sheets raving about the Second Coming and pulling out his dark wavy hair with his thick-jointed spatulate fingers in clumps. It was hardly a wasted trip, though it was successful in a manner and meaning she didn't expect. She had hoped the Rev. would have driven out her demon in some way, or touch the untouchable part of her soul with his supernaturally close connection with The Man Upstairs. But materializing out of that Georgian shack and back on the streets of Manhattan, her purpose was now more clear than ever; and she could go about it guiltless, because she figured if it was going to bring back Jesus, it couldn't be *all* bad. For wasn't even Judas essential for the saving of Mankind?

Also, with the ejaculation of the churchman's seed into her cervix she felt the last dregs of her humanity melt away, melt away as she fucked that man and "Whole Lotta Love" was playing in her head and suddenly she was back on the apartment with the Cute Goth Boy, and suddenly she was back in the closet of Casa de Claire de Lune with Glenn Mandible, and suddenly she was back with Pris, and suddenly she was back with Jenny, and suddenly she was back with Frank...

This dirty, *lurid* world--

*** *** ***

The Caress found themselves somewhat adrift after the sudden (and assumed) death of their leader. Rache's ideas and plans had been so above what the majority of them were capable of envisioning or understanding that all the projects--the Scarlet Moon, the acquisition of further properties, the scheduled meetings and networkings and strategic turnings--all stopped cold. Word of the rumored assassin--apparently a being far more powerful than any

vampire and possibly in possession of godlike abilities--had scared off many of the clan, scared off the more perceptive and forward-thinking of the group, the ones that might have been able to salvage all those dreams Rache Merrywether had harbored and nurtured, those dreams that sought to make respectable vampires out of the lot of them. Some went back to their areas of origin, on to further contaminate the world, not wanting to stick around if this creature had a hate-on for their departed leader so much that she was desiring to off anyone associated with her.

But the others--the unmotivated, the low of attention-span, the hedonistic, the stupid, the dull-eyed blood junkies--they went Underground. They went underground not to make a statement, or with the idea to shore up their collective energies and power to restart The Caress, but simply because it was the easiest and most convenient thing to do. And so they pulled up stakes and shoved the money and equipment in sacks and bags and flooded the tunnels beneath the City like roaches; and though they were not the sort of vampires to be self-reflective or to care too much about tomorrow, they knew on some level that they were sentencing themselves to un-lifes as ferals, that in a few months all the trappings and discipline of their civilization would collapse into chaos, anarchy-packed bestiality. And that was fine. That was enough.

And the day when Tara Amadeo decided to start the Apocalypse, right before she would manage to stir up from the depths of what was left of her soul enough resistance to prompt a visit by the Horde and a pleasant conversation over biscuits, the witch thought herself into the lightless fetid murk of the tunnels, and incinerated all 48 Caress that were camped there, sent fire raining from her fingertips and made them run though the narrow pathways, jackets and jeans and undead flesh in flames, and Tara incinerated all 48 vampires, making sure that the brimstone that lept from her skin was of a degree that would allow no survivors.

She wanted *ash*.

And she could say that she did it for Pris, did it for Generra; or did it for *Christ*.

But she did it. Because she needed to *destroy*. And it seemed like the most blameless way to go about it.

They were just *vampires*.

But how much better were humans than vampires, really? The tall, short-haired woman in black asked herself this question as she flew above the streets, watching the smoke pour out of gratings and manhole covers like sea foam, glimpsing at the occasional human on the street on silhouetted by a window shade on that late Spring evening.

Humans--

This lurid, dirty world--

Humans--how much bette--

The witch grabbed her head in agony.

“No! I’m not doing this!”

Her body switched to a horizontal position and she flew wildly, directionless, cradling her skull in a psychic avalanche, passing by in a blur all the artifacts of the human world she had, until this late date, had been a part of-- buildings, streets, signs, billboards, schoolyards, sculpture. People. Humans.

Humans.

Yes, the humans were stupid, ungrateful, destructive little pricks--but since when was *that* a crime punishable by the End?

And how about the ones who *weren’t* pricks? And the ones that *occasionally weren’t*? How did a demon go about and measure it? The Apocalypse--it wasn’t choosy.

And Jesus--he was prophesized just to save the Believers. The others he would let die and be damned. What sort of Jesus *was* that? It was the sort of character only stupid humans could come with.

This dirty, lurid world...

But the people--

The Apocalypse takes no exception.

The Apocalypse is absolute, isn’t it? (yes)

I...(the witch put her gray clawed hand to her gray temple)

I don't know if I can go through with this.

And the city was motionless below her, and it looked unreal, like a landscape on a train set.

I don't know if I can...

And now she is sitting in the marble dining hall of Lucifer.

*** *** ***

Lucifer looks rather like Brad Pitt if he was completely red from head to toe, and has the easy, folksy manner of John Boy Walton. And yet...there is something *refined* about him, something of *Quality*, and it would stand to reason, for he is a Prince, after all. He sits on a gilt high-backed chair of exquisite tooling, and this is a chair that exists solely in Tara's mind; and as this takes place solely in Tara's mind, she has a tough time visualizing her own chair, but there is a lovely circular table between them, made of marble, with a glass surface, and between the glass and the marble are...pressed...many intricate and beautiful things...lace...flowers...and Tara finds herself unable to look up at her red-haired companion, because she finds herself fascinated with the patterns on the table, she is slumping down in her chair (that she cannot visualize) like the Dormouse and has her face nearly pressed up against the surface of the glass.

"You must continue," she hears Lucifer say with the voice of a stout-hearted high school basketball coach. "We *need* you..."

"Where...am I?" the gray woman in black asks slowly, not entirely interested in the outcome, still mesmerized by the pattern under the glass.

"You are completely out-of-time. We plucked you out."

"So you heard me...what I said. What I thought."

"Yes."

Tara extends a gray finger and carefully traced a path of pale pink lace.

"I'm completely fucked-up."

Lucifer shakes his head gently.

"Temporarily."

“But I’m out-of-time. So technically, this is infinite. My condition. Infinite fucked-upness.”

“We are going to *change* time--you and I. Time and infinity will exchange places.”

“Ah yes,” she nods knowingly, smiling at the remembrance. “Time-fucking. It’s what me and Molly tried. Back at Luna Park. We did it because we had nothing else better to do.”

“Despite what you or selected others might have thought about that enterprise--it was a noble one, born of Truth. You were both too young and too human at the time to understand. But the world was *already* corrupted. Reality was corrupted. Time was corrupted. It started thousands upon thousands of years ago. Back then, we wore breathing-apparatuses on our heads, it made our faces look like elephants. We tried our best to maintain the purity of this planet and its native life forms. But time and evolution--assisted by a rather deranged fellow--put a stop to all that, with the introduction of the *Hybrid Seed*...”

Tara is now halfway lying facedown on the table, trying vainly, drunkenly to climb up it with her useless legs. She begins to cry, but it is unfocused and blurry and sounds more like coughing.

“T-there’s been a terrible *accident*,” she sobs to herself, tears falling upon the patterns, and magnifying portions of the labyrinthine path they make, “and now my whole temporal-casket’s gone to *shit*! My filters are b-b-busted! And I’m learning things I don’t want to know...I’m *learning* things...”

“Please rest assured,” Lucifer replies, patting her head, “that while you might experience temporary discomforts--dizziness, dry mouth, tinnitus, disorientation, ectcetera--that things will eventually settle down to the way they were before, or at least a reasonable facsimile thereof.”

“How much did they *remove*,” she asks miserably.

“Oh, no problem at all. Just a shaving. Just a shaving. And we don’t think it’s going to have any real effect. We don’t think.”

“This wasn’t my fault...I didn’t deserve this...”

“Of course you didn’t, cupcake, of course you didn’t. But now we need you

to *focus*."

The witch finally manages to hoist her entire body on the marble table, but it seems to grow small at the same time and collapses under her weight. She is now eye-to-toe to Lucifer's red patent leather spats; they smell like artificial roses.

"Humans are basically a cancer upon the Earth," the red man continues as if Tara is still sitting across from him, and now she is suddenly again sitting across from him as if nothing happened, the table again between them but now it is shaped like a trapezoid and has a vase with flowers in it. "They are unnatural to this sphere, they are a danger to its flora and fauna, and they must be *eliminated*. Once we are freed and the humans eliminated, we can start over again. Don't you see--we *can start over again!* It can be a *paradise!*"

He is now no longer in his seat, and Tara never sees him get up, never sees or anticipates his rematerialization behind her chair, reaching in with his handsome red mouth and biting her in the neck, sending not blood but *color* spreading out from the wound, coloring her just like him, a red tide of color spreading out from her neck to every inch of her body, growing out her hair into a long, thick crimson mane.

"*Don't you see?*," he repeats, seated once again and putting a muscled, well-manicured hand over her own newly-red one and giving it a reassuring squeeze. He pulls a large pink stuffed bear from behind his back. "An' I give you teddy bear."

"Okay," she says, taking the toy in her hands eagerly.

And that's all it takes to destroy the world.

*** *** ***

She was in her full power. She was *Chaos*. She strode confidently down Broadway towards Times Square, red luminescent skin sheathed in a skin-tight, tactile suit that was, in truth, just one big, form-fitting scab. Below, under her feet, They lie, *dreaming*. Right under Times Square, being fed decade after decade by

cast artificial lights absorbed into the ground. By the large amounts of money that metaphorically change hands in the corporate towers and restaurants at lunchtime, by the alcohol spilled and the sex traded deep into the night, in a night-land now significantly less peopled by vampires, a night-land in the shadow of the empty Dermaco offices, Pris Baxter's corner office abandoned and covered in a whit sheet of dust...

They lie, dreaming...

And she in her full power, and she isn't troubled about it anymore. But before she acts her final act, a bit of fun—spread the Chaos, send it silent into every bar, every eatery, every store, no need to lift a finger, just pump it through your pores, black smoke infecting, friends hitting, colleagues punching, children in twos and threes attacking parents, hookers attacking johns with straight razors, suited doughy men throwing other suited men through plate-glass windows, citizens hitting and punching and screaming at each other in the streets, and as Tara walked towards the big signs at that famous intersection, in the middle of the sudden orgy of violence, a crack appeared in the blacktop under her feet, a crack that grew longer and wider with each step she took and she lifted her red arms up and flew to the top of the Ramen Noodles sign, perched on its rim with its manufactured steam rising all about her, and she surveyed the Chaos she wrought, saw that it was *good*, saw how it backed up and underlined everything that Lucifer said, that humans were a cancer upon this blue-green marble—but she didn't need this display to tell *that* to her.

The witch lifted up her shirt, looked at the swollen gray-white scabby disk on her abdomen, and licked a finger and rubbed the relief tenderly.

Wakey-wakey...

(The sound of the violence below, the gush of adrenalin it produced...)

And out of her stomach poked out the Snake, bloodlessly but wet, and she reveled in the feathery touch of its tongue as it craned up from her gut to greet her. Then she sent it on its way, down, into the mob below, past the angry limbs and striking fists, a perfect dive into the crack in the pavement—

And then Earth swallowed up the snake, and the reptile burrowed its way

through the depths to rouse Them—

Tara could hear Them say to her:

“Prepare the gate!”

And she was so happy that she finally found a purpose in life, because she was so scared that she was a loser...

*** *** ***

Malcolm Dust's sleep was a shade more disturbed and unsatisfying than usual, but he had chalked it up to restless leg syndrome. He still lived in the basement studio below Lord Of Illusions, but had turned the shop into more of an iconic museum of magic and magic, a museum dedicated to the beliefs that he formerly held and which had provided a meaning to his life for many years. Most of the occult effects of his apartment had been packed away or sold on eBay, and only the red tapestry of Baphomet remained on the wall, for it had that edgy quality about it that those crazy Goth chicks he liked to fuck adored. And besides, he was a wee bit of a masochist and felt he needed top be reminded on a daily basis of his former folly. And while the stuff that had cast its infernal light in his life was now relegated to the realm of the Tooth Fairy, he had learned to enjoy his magick-free existence; and if not exactly “enjoy,” at least there were no more incidences that made him doubt his sanity.

For what Malcolm crucially realized as he stepped through the door of his own middle-age was that he was basically playing at Dungeons and Dragons for the last 20 years of his life.

And that all the voices he thought he had heard and the miracles that he thought he had witnessed were merely signs of a nervous exhaustion.

And now he knew better.

And sometimes—*sometimes*—he remembered that queer girl that he used to tutor in the ways of magick. And he wondered (marginally, of course) how she was doing, and he let a small, M&M-sized pang of guilt strike his chest over the fact that he helped feed his interest in all that rubbish. And he wondered if she

ever would grow up to know better. But knowing her—

—she wouldn't have been strong enough to brook it.

But maybe she did turn out okay, or at least decent enough, and traded the one addiction for another, the one illusion for another, for that is what the man considered this whole bullshit business of “personal evolution” and “maturity” to be about.

His pale freckled torso, sporting a still minor-league but still noticeable paunch around his mid-section, flopped over on his back, sweat forming a film between his shirtless body and the striped sheets of his fold-out. He rubbed the back of his hand over his blond thinning hairline and down across his face over his beard, the perspiration making him itch and thirst.

Yes, maybe it all works out, more or less, the way the majority of these things do, it works out and recedes into obscurity and nobody is more or less the wise—

The rotary phone, whose cords wound its way through the cluttered patch of floor next to the bed—amongst the old socks and the books on World War II and the cardboard takeout containers—rang once, jolting him out of his sleep with a phlegmy gasp, then silence for a few minutes and rang again non-stop, frustrating his attempts for him to just blow it off and resume his sleep, torturing him with the idea that if he didn't pick up the receiver, he'd never know, he'd never know—

“(God-diggity-dammit!) H'lo?”

“MALCOLM!”

You could have cut the short blond man's balls off with a dull butterknife. Lucy. Holloway. What the *fuck* did that fat bitch have up her ass now?

“Ehr...no habla Engles...por favor...”

“Turn on CNN, Malcolm,” the woman said gravely, the tremor in her otherwise frightful-as-hell battleaxe dyke-from-heck voice actually convincing him to do the deed.

Click

“It's the end of the world as we know it...” a newscaster's voice narrated

over a live televised image of Times Square in flames, ordinary folks, cops, firemen, and National Guardsmen all clobbering each other and saying sore words. "...and I'm not feeling too fine. Why is everyone in Midtown Manhattan apparently going crazy?"

"People in the City are *already* crazy," Malcolm said under his breath, his blue eyes frozen to the 18 inch screen and his hand holding the receiver away from his ear a good couple of feet. "But still...wow, it's like some sort of *riot*, or some..."

"She's going to kill us all! It's finally happening!! *And it's all your fault!!!*"

Well, thought the bearded man still holding the receiver away from his ear but hearing every word. *Strangely, I always thought I'd hear that, in my life, sooner or later...*

"Y'know, you hippies gotta stop hitting the peace pipe and go read some Rousseau, or..."

"Tara's become the porthole to Hell! It's the End–Ragnarok, Twilight of the Gods, Apocalypse-Right-Now–do you understand?! Are you *psyched*, Mr. Dust? Because it's what you *wanted*, wasn't it? To have your beloved Lucifer walk this Earth and his minions liberated? *Isn't it?!*"

And the man merely dropped the phone as Lucy's words merged with what he finally recognized on the helicopter-cam as being the face of that queer girl; he saw nothing familiar but the *shape* of her, and he instantly recognized the essence inside that red shape...

"The Scarlet Whore of Babylon," Malcolm said dreamily, as if in a trance. "Well what do you know–Crowley and the Fundies were *both* right all along. Cool beans..."

"IT'S NOT 'COOL BEANS,' YOU MORON–WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE!"

"No..." he murmured, impulsively reaching into his pajama-bottoms and scratching his balls nervously. "No...*Lucifer* wouldn't do that...Lucifer is the god of knowledge, the *light-bringer*...his negative image in popular culture is nothing more than the result of a smear campaign of oppression promulgated by the Judeo-Christian block..."

“I’m not the biggest fan of the Patriarchy myself, Mal, but look into her face—what do *you* think she is going to bring on behalf of your ‘god of knowledge’—instructions on how to end world hunger or build a radio with only two coconuts and a piece of bamboo?!”

“Look, I don’t even know why you’re laying this trip on me, right? I’m not even *into* this shit anymore!”

“Because you *taught* her!”

“She knew this shit *long* before me, sister!”

“Stop being a baby and take your responsibility like a *man*, Mal...you *know* you taught her everything she knew, set her on this path...don’t you remember...back in Kennedy College...”

“*What*?! What the fuck are you talking—I went to NYU!” He suddenly felt something vibrate against the sides of his head, a strange doubling of his vision, and put his hand up to his face to find a pair of glasses...he knew it was the round, wire-rimmed granny specs even before he tore them off and threw them on the floor as if it was a rat that had climbed onto his hair—

“Don’t you remember that night in Luna Park, Mal—don’t you remember what you *did*...and now we’re all going to *die*...”

Malcolm felt a fatigue wash over his body, let the phone receiver fall lightly from his fingertips, and walked over to the television set, kneeling before it, putting his fingertips to the glass, watching the chaos unfold, watching the shaky, static-punctuated image of this woman in red raising her arms and silently, deeply concentrating on bringing them up, up up up from where they had been dreaming and in bondage for so long...and how it was...the culmination of a Faith...the power and everything else that he had sought for so long...it was a little like a kid amongst the crumpled wrapping-paper on Christmas morning...he had gotten, in a sense, his Red Ryder rifle...and it was also like his sanity was being sorely shaken again...okay, his sanity *was* being sorely shaken...and what Lucy said on the phone...what if...what if this creeping crazy chaos that Tara had unleashed affected the Wiccan’s mind in some way...and affected *his* mind, as well...and maybe affected...something *bigger*...

He took his hand off the screen, leaving two wet handprints in his wake; he stared at these hands, as if they were alien to him, and put them together palm-to-palm as if he was praying—

And he thought, his watery blue eyes wide and manic:

What if it was all really true?

And then he ran to get his suitcase out of the closet, the one that held all his good occult shit, and he dug and he dug inside that suitcase until he found it...

*** *** ***

Tara Amadeo had, in her estimation, reached the apex of her power and the *raison d'être* of her existence. Her mind and personality were almost gone, and what remained stayed in psychic rapport with the Horde slowly, tortuously climbing their way up through the earth below. Using attenuated, near-omnipotent magick she helped pull them up, smashing all manner of rock and gate that seraphim and shaman had put up over the millennia to stop them. Below her what was still conscious from the crowd continued to pummel each other like robots, among them several news reporters who had come on the scene. Windows everywhere in the Square were shattered, goods lifted and broken under foot; the storefront for Toys R Us looked as if Santa Claus had vomited toys all over Broadway, the stronger children terrorizing whoever dared stray within the zone of chaos that had been erected.

And through the mass of fallen and struggling people a small figure cut purposefully through, walked and pushed and shoved his way until he was directly beneath the red woman. He had no shirt and his hair stuck up in every direction like a crazy person. He stretched his arms out towards her, flexing his fingers like a baby that wanted to be picked up.

“All hail Tara Amadeo! All Hail Lucifer! You’ve finally arrived—I knew you could do it! Tara! All hail Tara!”

She didn’t quite recognize him, but she didn’t quite recognize humans in

general as being more than just a mess of ibexes or ants–

“Hail mighty Lucifer! I welcome your arrival! Oh *powerful* Scarlet Whore of Babylon, I *salute* you!”

He was fairly sobbing like a madman, yanking at locks of his blond hair, intoning praise Renfield-like from deep within his throat, chuckling and crying indistinguishable from one another.

“*Oh, Mommy!* Mighty Lucifer!” He yanked out another clump of hair. “I *salute* you! I *salute* you! Scarlet Whore I *salute* you!”

It was intriguing (and also a wee bit flattering, flattery being one of the few human traits she had left) to have one of those little human wretches act in such a fashion, to consciously be aware of the Great Undertaking she and the Horde were setting out to do. And she raised him up in the air with her mind, the damaged, blinking lights of the various monitors and advertisements along the way illuminating his body in weird combinations of colors.

When he was finally on the platform next to her, the wind blowing his hair to and fro (while her long red hair remained strangely motionless and full and thick and layered like a Beardsley illustration), he threw himself at her feet and raved:

“*I knew you could do it!* From the moment I laid eyes on you! I *knew* you’d be the one to bring the *Father* back to his rightful place on the throne of the world!” The blond man stood back up and looked at her with an expression of perfect obsessive reverence. “*Tara!* You’ve *done* it, praise you! I’m so *proud* of you!”

She felt herself soften at his words, put up no defense as he stepped nearer to her.

“Thank-you,” she said, her eyes and mouth simply caverns of red magickal energy, her glowing lips creasing into a faint smile.

“And I just...I just wanted to say...in person...how *proud* I really am of you...and...that...” He suddenly pulled athame out of his pajamas and stabbed her with both hands in the chest. “...I’m *sorry*, Tara. I really am.”

*** *** ***

She had gone down as soon as he did it; somehow he knew instinctively that she would. Several dozen No-Men that were on the scene but helpless against Tara in her demonic form took advantage of her mortal wounding by blasting her with their guns/flame-throwers as if she was Michael Myers—blew off a leg and charred most of her body “just to be sure.” More agents of the Nine wound their way through the crowd, reviving and healing people best they could and wiping their memories as they did so. Ridding the world of the knowledge of this particular incident would be cumbersome but necessary, if the Reality was to be preserved.

Malcolm knelt on the ledge on top of the Ramen Noodles sign, steam bellowing up past him, sort of crumpled in a shocked, exhausted position long after the No-Men carried off her body; he asked what they were going to do with her, but they merely looked at him like he was a cockroach and moved on.

Some way to treat the man who just saved the world.

Some way to treat the man who took advantage of Tara Amadeo’s last bits of humanity to stab her to death. A tall, broad-shouldered black man in a trenchcoat and glasses materialized before him; it hardly made Malcolm blink, for he had seen so many of the damn things all night. But this was the first to address him.

“The Nine wishes to bestow sincerest thanks for your bravery.”

Malcolm regarded him with tired, red-rimmed eyes, his thinning hair whipping in the wind.

“So what are they going to do with her?”

“Study her, neutralize whatever is left, and keep her as an artifact.”

“You don’t think they could...I dunno...maybe *bury* her or something?”

“The Nine have a glass case waiting for her...”

The little bearded man got up and stared angrily at his reflection in the other’s mirrored glasses.

“God-dammit, that’s not what I’m talking about! I meant, put her to rest. In

peace!!”

“Son...she *is* at rest. She’s dead.”

Malcolm remembered the way she looked at him with such...*incomprehension* as he stabbed her, as this most powerful being was brought to a place where hurt of both the emotional and physical kind seared across her face, and *he* put her there—

“Yeah. Well.” He rubbed his cold chest. “I guess...that’s *it*, then.”

“Not quite. There is the matter of your memories of this experience. Since you were the savior of your species, the Nine feels it is only polite to extend to you the option of retaining or choosing to rid yourself of the memories of this particular incident.”

Down below people, newly-anointed with amnesia, stumbled aimlessly and helpless amongst the wreckage, sticking out their heads at curbs, and hailing vainly for taxi-cabs.

“You mean...forget this ever happened? *All* of it?”

“Every factor of it. Personally, it is recommended. Returning images of that which transcends accepted reality only provides the individual with unnecessary burden. Mind-wipe is a totally painless procedure, and is performed on beggars and kings alike, so you needent feel exploited by the Nine. Even your American President is currently in the process of undergoing the treatment.”

“The *President*?! Why?”

“After being appraised of the situation in New York’s Times Square for several hours, he had considered the area to be victim to some sort of terrorist plague or gas, and felt the only way to protect the rest of the country was to nuke the site. However, once he grasped the religious elements of the matter, he quickly changed his plans, hoping that it was really the Apocalypse as predicted by St. John and that Jesus Christ of Nazareth would be coming soon.”

“Jesus, huh? Guess that guy didn’t show up for this little brouhaha, huh?”

Roy the No-Man said nothing. The steam from the Ramen Noodles continued to percolate, but it provided no comfort for the half-naked man and he folded is arms tight against his chest.

“Anyway...no. I don’t want to give it up. My memories. These events...they are a part of who I am now. And who I am is all I *have*, really. So, no.”

“That is fine. But I, on behalf of the Nine, must caution you. You may retain your memories, *but you must leave this alone*. Do not revisit it. Do not try to “follow up.” Do not try to understand. Simply move on with your life.”

*** *** ***

Thane Cockrum broke the last Chicken McNugget in two.

“He told you that, did he? Direct from the Nine?”

Malcolm pushed away the halved nugget that the long-haired man offered him.

“Yeah.”

“And now you’ve got the body in your apartment.”

“Yeah.”

“That you took from the glass case.”

“Yeah.”

“And you want me to procure for you a necromancer?”

“Yeah.”

“So you can bring her back from the dead?”

“Yeah.”

“Because you feel guilty.”

“Yeah.”

The older gentleman popped the chicken in his mouth and chewed it for an inordinately long amount of time, thinking. Then he said:

“Well, I’ll ponder it. If I can think of a suitable person, I’ll let you know. But I don’t particularly think your plan is advantageous, y’know? Might not be the wisest way to go about things.”

Malcolm looked as if he aged another five years since he first walked into the McDonalds next to the Continental.

“I never got into magick because I was interested in the wisest way to go

about things.”

“Hahaha...oh, *Malcolm*. We had some *good times*, didn’t we? Back in school?”

“Never went to school with you, Thane. You’re 55.”

“Oh...oh. My brain...” He tapped at the left side of his temple with a tattooed finger. “...it’s not what it used to be. Excuse me. But. I have something for you, before I forget...(you going to eat that?)”

Malcolm shook his head, a couple more strands of his hair falling upon the white, ketchup-stained counter; Thane quickly put the last chicken half in his mouth and continued to talk as he chewed.

“...so I got *this* in the mail...” He produced a golden ticket from the back pocket of his jeans. “...I’ve seen it, already...but I thought of *you*...”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think I’m going to be watching any movies right at the moment, Thane, thanks any...”

The older man pushed the ticket into Malcolm’s palm.

“This is a *good* show. I got it through a subscription service. Go see it, when you’re not raising the dead. Even “world-saviors” need t’have a break every once in a while.”

Malcolm sighed and just tucked the ticket in his jacket.

“So, what do you think of my story, Thane?”

The warlock with the long brown hair blinked like a confused newborn kitten.

SCENES FROM A LIFE

So two young Satanists in their late teens decide to conduct a late-night ceremony in the graveyard. Geez, all the glossy finely-hewn gray monuments, the quaint benches under young poplars and the well-trimmed grass atop the mounds...where's the romance in that?

The one with the long black hair tied up in a ponytail—Rod—he's the one with the Ideas. He has a well-thumbed copy of the Necronomicon that he lifted off a Border's Books in the City; he felt no guilt overdoing the act, though indeed he felt little guilt over the act. If one couldn't steal the Necronomicon, if there was some taboo against it, if one had to actually plunk down the \$6.95 or so at the counter and get that printed receipt with the time and the cashier's name neatly printed on it—where would be the romance in that?

It's all about *Romance*. Romance can take the most dreary and banal and seemingly pointless of lives and invest it with a quality bordering on the Infinite. And Rod and his friend August, well, in this bullshit dead-end Long Island pseudo-burb, on the threshold of adulthood and nary a plan between them—not like those faggot know-it-alls with their goddamn college plans and SAT bullshit—they needed Romance. And the Necronomicon, though one might not normally think of it that way, was a very romantic book. How could one not find the rantings of the Mad Arab romantic, in its way, with its descriptions of Middle Eastern adventure and grand Spirit conjurings? Even the most gruesome ending of a Lovecraft tale was more noble for them than a destiny of filling cups at the local 7-Eleven, which was what Rod was looking at as a best-case scenario after graduation. At least pudgy, pimply, tow-headed August knew how to fix cars and toasters.

But Rod had one thing going for him—the Romance of a mind interfacing with the Infinite and just plain imaginary. It was *something*. And it hypnotized August. And so when Rod suggested they sneak into the cemetery and perform the ritual over a grave, there was no hesitation. And if Rod had said they were

going to dig up bodies and fuck them under the waxing moon, there still probably would be no hesitation.

Fortunately, a proper worshiping of Satan, at least on the beginner-to-intermediate level, need not involve the sexual mutilation of a corpse. Rod merely produced a wrinkly bag from the produce section of the supermarket filled with “ritual items”—a chipped, dual-pointed crystal he swiped from this witch store in Brooklyn, some crow feathers, and Grandpa’s old straight-razor. Rod placed the feathers and crystal over the grave of a baby (something that none of the Evil books he read ever mentioned but which seemed rather suitably blasphemous) in a “meaningful way,” unfolded the straight razor, and nicked his arm, savoring the way the blood felt both hot at the initial energy but also cool like water as it dripped down his arm. Then he handed the ivory-handled razor to August.

“Do it.”

“Uh, I don’t know, man...if my folks see the...”

“DO IT!”

And so of course August “did it” and the pair angled their arms so that the claret, thin but its dark red dramatic against their pasty arms, dripped on the grave. Then Rod took out the dog-eared copy of the Necronomicon from out his back pocket and recited some series of pseudo-Sumerian words at random. And the words sounded ugly and gutteral and most probably fatal. And Rod and August made several entreaties to Satan involving money, pussy, and revenge. And so.

What the two young men, who had been huffing a significant amount of Pam beforehand and were sporadically hallucinating Lovecraftian beasties that were a cross between Tinkerbell and a Coop illustration, didn’t realize was that in another section of the cemetery, not very far away at all, Mia Cefalu’s corpse, reanimated by their words in some wonderous, Speilbergian sort of way, was busy yanking her fingernails out in an attempt to claw her way out of her coffin. Luckily, a series of heavy rainfalls and unseasonably balmy weather had softened the wood, and in no time at all she had climbed her way out.

Shakily standing in front of her own glossy, finely-hewn gray monument—

her body looking not a day rotted in her mouldering worm-eaten off-white silk gown—would have perhaps been somewhat of a trauma for her, if not for the fact that at the moment her intellect was barely above that of a salami's. Though admittedly well-preserved after her brief jaunt underground, her *cabeza* was somewhat addled, and the bulging eyes and slack, formaldehyde-drooling mouth looked rather at odds with her pretty face. Hers was a spirit and consciousness as black as a dormant television screen, animated not so much, as the cliche goes, by a “spark”—what drove her was more on the level of the power of a sinkhole, moving inexorably, pulling down everything caught within its perimeter not out of malice or reason but simply *because*.

And the smell of fresh claret, of the *flesh*—

Meanwhile, the two young men casually sat around the grave of the infant, Rod sort of leaning against the blood-stained mound and hugging it with one arm in a jaunty, almost gamine fashion as if he was Doris Day in “Pillow Talk.”

“Ooh, it’s gonna happen now,” he sensuously intoned, the Pam sending his consciousness into the top inch of his skull, floating there like a dead (or merely very dizzy) goldfish. “I’ve done a bunch of shit like this, but now I *know* it’s for real...now it’s for *real*...”

“What do you think’s gonna happen,” August, his chubby face leaning against the cool edge of the gravestone, asked with the innocence and wonder of an 8-year-old boy. “Will things just...*appear*? ”

Rod stretched his arm out and admired the handiwork of his blade, that thin dark raised line haloed in red smear.

“Don’t be *stupid*. You’re just stupid. You don’t *know* about these things. It’s a lot more complicated than that. You haven’t read the stuff like *I* have. It’s going to be *elegant*.”

“What do you mean?”

“*Elegant*, you numbnut!” The dark-haired boy jumped to his feet, apparently incensed by his companion’s inability to comprehend, or even just angered by the mere fact that he had to hang out with a boor like that, because Rod always fancied himself to be somebody Beyond. “The universe don’t work

like ‘boom’ you get it and that’s that! It’s got to be artful—it’s got to be meaningful. You gotta learn to read the *signs!*”

“Well, you don’t gotta yell at me.”

“Well, if you wasn’t stupid I wouldn’t be yellin’ at ya.”

August’s face became dull and hurt, almost wall-eyed.

“I’m *not* stupid...”

“You’re a stupid fat fuck, August.”

The pudgy young man wrapped his arms around his head and brought his knees to his chin in a sudden defensive, regressive motion, curling himself into a ball as if he was in second grade and getting pelted by fists and feet.

“Uh’m *not*,” he cried, his voice muffled by his thick limbs.

“You are, that’s all you are, just a stupid, retarded fat *fuck...*”

“Shut-up!”

“The only reason I even hang *around* you is because I don’t got nobody better at the moment, all my real friends are back in *Jersey...*”

“Shut-up!”

August no longer saw Rod, saw anything, heard anything, his head covered in that protective wrapping of ample, freckled flesh, blood rushing in his ears, his mind ringing in the wake of chemical intoxication and primal shame and anger. He was a smart boy, and was capable of more than his sorry performance in school indicated, but emotionally it was pretty similar to what Rod said—he was retarded. Sweet. He was a sweet boy. There was no place for his kind in the high-school he attended, or in the workplace-world that awaited him after graduation. His kind was built for abuse, built for set-ups and pratfalls and “good-natured ribbing.” And, had he lived, he would have been steadily pushed for the rest of his born days, pushed, pushed, pushed until he either learned to be an asshole like the rest of them or broke somebody’s neck like Lenny’s unfortunate mouse. So it was better that Mia came upon him, while he was still blind and deaf to the world, came upon him after she dispatched his associate with one swift, clean tear to the jugular, came upon him and her lips felt so soft and as they nuzzled August between his clenched arms it felt *nice*, like a girlfriend—

*** *** ***

Her hunger sated, and the fresh infusion of blood dredging up a little more of her consciousness—not quite human, but entering the family of vertebrates—Mia limped on through the necropolis, her knee joints soft and her steps unsteady like a newborn fawn. The need for sustenance no longer drove her to move—but why was she moving, then? Why not merely collapse on the ground like a bundle of twigs until the next stimulus? Was she now so advanced that she had the good sense to move herself to an area significantly more peopled by the living to seek out her prey? *Why* was she moving? What drove her to walk up to the locked gates of the enclosure and bang her head against the bars in incomprehension until it sunk in that they weren’t giving way, drove her to shake the black bars in frustration and gnash her teeth and then awkwardly climb up and over?

What drove her to stumble along the dimly-lit streets seemingly-blind, bumping into mailboxes and garbage cans, arms out in front of her and grasping into the air? What drove her to trod once again those familiar, tree-lined sidewalks, and what radar did she possess that drew her to the very block, to the very steps, of the house on Shore’s End with the overgrown garbage-strewn lawn, and hit the door with her floppy, loosely-jointed white hand?

*** *** ***

“Fraaaaaannnn...”

Frank Cefalu, unshaven and dressed in a ripped T-shirt and a pair of plaid boxers, was unsure of what to say to his wife as he met her at the door.

“Fraaaaaannnn...”

Since his introduction to the world of the Undead he had entertained several of what he considered to be the most extreme scenarios he could think of, sort of combinations of Mia crime-scene photos, Orlen’s noseless face

growling, and the sight of Billy Richard devouring alive a white rabbit.

“Fraaaaaannnn...”

But though he had fantasized many times of Mia’s return to him, such fantasies had always involved some variation of the theme that none of this ever happened in the first place.

“Fraaaaaannnn...”

He had always dreamt that she would come back to him “clean.”

“Fraaaaaannnn...”

And so he was unsure of what to say...

“Fraaaaaannnn...”

...or even what to *think*.

“Fraaaaaannnn...”

So he invited her in.

“Fraaaaaannnn...”

And then they shortly thereafter had sex against the kitchen sink, the contents of which no longer stank because they had rotted themselves out of existence.

“Fraaaaaannnn...”huhuhuh...”

And coming from the basement could be faintly heard the words of Billy Richard Rooke:

“Buddy? Everything okay up there? Buddy? *Buddy*? ”

*** *** ***

There are many pinpoints in time when one might say The Sweet Hereafter was born, all of which had dotted the lifescape of screenwriter Terry Aprille. Terry had been writing “The Sweet Hereafter” long before he had actually started writing it, back in ‘88 when he was an employee of New Eden Studios (subsidiary of Schreckton-Metroxy). I don’t think Terry fully comprehended that he was merely an employee of New Eden--rather, he considered himself some sort of partner or independent contractor, poached from Pulsing Aorta Pictures to

develop a vampire-themed soap-opera. However, several “deep cuts” and “massaging” by studio editors and script doctors later--

“*This story*,” Terry began, his voice overlain by a hard, hissing, rising anger, “has no plot.” He was a tall, wiry man in his late twenties with broad shoulders that seemed incongruous with the rest of his Ichabod Crane-esque physique, and they stooped slightly as if in recognition of this fact. The bone-structure in his face, his strong chin and jawline, would have propped up a traditionally heroic visage had it not been undermined by a feminine turn of his lip, a subtle hollow of his cheek, and deep, coffee-colored, dark-rimmed eyes. His brown hair was layered in the style that was popular at the time, but it was obviously overgrown and untended, and hung limply about his thick eyebrows and the nape of his long neck. Draped upon his angular frame was a wrinkled black sports jacket with wrinkled black chinos; in contrast hung a freshly-laundered, smoothly-pressed white T-Shirt with a silk-screened graphic of William Burroughs. Terry was a big fan of T-shirts with pictures on them, as they were the only forms of clothing he was able to relate to; all else were incomprehensible and too subtle, full of arcane rules of maintenance and the fickle mandates of fashion that baffled him, overcame him, never produced the effect he had dreamt about, the elegant figure of a gothic protagonist.

He stood at the head of a long, glossy conference room table of deep mahogany, before assorted editors and project managers and overseers and financial types and all sorts of smartly-suited fellows and ladies that he might have been introduced to once but never really knew or understood who they were. The seat directly facing him, all the way at the other end of the table, was empty and Terry had the peculiar and frustrating feeling that he was addressing nobody, nobody but perhaps the burnished-brass sign that hung behind the vacant space, the New Eden logo with the stylized rendering of a tree whose labyrinthine branches poured over the words and reached out towards the viewer (an unobtrusive “Schreckton-Metroxy” lining the bottom of the design almost as a border).

Terry repeated his original assessment of his “refurbished” script, throwing

a maroon-colored copy of said document down upon the table with a heavy thump.

“This story has no plot!”

Terry’s intense eyes roamed over the faces of the people that sat to the left and the right of him, seeking at first an ally, then narrowing his hopes to merely a sympathetic glance, then willing to settle for indignation, anger, a *pulse*, some sign of life besides their seated bodies and the occasional fidgeting with a pen or cup of coffee. But the employees of New Eden, of which he himself was unwittingly a member, were very well-trained; they simply looked on upon the present declaration of discontent and the desperate rant that was soon to follow with an impeccably calm reasonableness, occasionally making a notation in their pads following one point or another the queer-looking fellow made as if they cared.

“This story has no plot--you’ve gone over the script so many times with *your-your-your* ‘people’ that it’s like I can’t even *recognize* it anymore...”

“*Terry*,” a woman with a severe black pageboy and a cluster of pearls around her neck said in a soothing voice. “There’s no reason to get *upset*. We’re all your *friends* here.” She made a cryptic mark upon her yellow notepad. “To be honest, we’re baffled by your response. Is there a particular passage that you had a concern about?”

“Y-you made the vampires *heroes*! That’s...that’s more than a mere omitted line. That’s the whole damn thing! And they’re not even *real* heroes, with some sort of depth and conflict--they’re like a bunch of hotdogging teenagers in high school!”

“*Terry*,” soothingly said the woman again, her finely-manicured long red fingernails clacking around the white coffee mug between her palms. “Market research indicates that the main audience for this sort of fantasy show are teenagers. And in order to attract teenagers, we have to give them something they can more *relate* to...”

“Vampires are *killers*!” he shouted hoarsely, making a fist with his right hand that impotently hovered over the surface of the table-top.

“They also contain a certain degree of sex-appeal. Quite frankly, Terry, many of the characters in your story are quite...*unappealing*. Ugly, to be blunt. We’re looking for something with a bit more...*dark sensuality*.”

“There is a dark sensuality in my story.”

“*Charlie Manson* has a dark sensuality. We’re looking for something a little more along the lines of...Prince.”

“But-but-but that’s *unrealistic*...”

The dark-haired lady’s painted lips parted in a rare moment of candor, their corners curling upward and a perfect set of white teeth gleaming through the gap.

“Terry, vampires by their very *nature* are unrealistic. You might as well do a grim and gritty expose on mermaids.”

The lanky man was growing tired and ran his fingers through his limp, over-long bangs; he suddenly felt embarrassed by his attempts to write a serious vampire serial, the woman’s argument so very goddamn reasonable. *Perhaps*, he thought, *my problem is lack of objectivity*. And yet all those months he labored over it, it had made *sense*--even more than made *sense*, it seemed almost heroic, somehow. Socially relevant. Hadn’t he wrote enough fluff over the years--“Oujia The Forbidden Game,” “Box-Cutter Massacre,” “Valley Girl Zombies.” When New Eden approached Terry they had expressly encouraged him to expand his screenwriting ambitions far beyond the dime-store potboilers he was knocking out for Pulsing Aorta. And now they wanted to turn his characters into some sort of puerile fetish candy for adolescents. He had made his intentions for The Untitled Vampire Project very clear to New Eden, to the woman in pearls--if this was the way things were going to be, why did she even hire him in the first place? And before he knew it, the words had flew out of his mouth.

“Why did you people even *hire* me, anyway?”

“Because we respect your *talent*, of course,” the woman replied. But as she calmly emitted her steady, crystalline tones another soundtrack had began to overlay it, a soundtrack that was not incompatible in terms of cadence but had a significantly different sentiment. And as the woman in pearls prattled on about

this wonderful thing about Terry and that, this promise about retaining the original flavor of his screenplay and that, this pronouncement about New Eden's demonstrated commitment to the Artist and that, the other soundtrack rattled on, rattled on in Terry's left ear.

"We hired you to steal your ideas and *fuck* you, of course," the alternate soundtrack began. "Had you been willing to play along with us and keep your mouth shut, you might have been able to get a *cut*--a very *handsome* cut, not to mention medical benefits and a 401K. But we know your type. All hung up on your 'vision,' as if it really means a damn unless a company like New Eden or something comparable puts it out. After you die, nobody will give a flying shit about your oh-so-unique 'vision'--but they *will* remember the television show we put out in syndication. And so we offered you immortality, and went out of our way to transform that depressing pile of morosity you called a script into something that would be raved about in high-schools across America. Of course, even if you weren't an idealistic fool and had chosen to tow our line on this project, we still would have tried to take advantage of your relative inexperience and cheat you out of points and other benefits that you'd be entitled to if the show was a hit. But no such fear there, because, as I said, we had you pegged about the second meeting we had with you. Deep down you hate and distrust Authority, hate and distrust the Status Quo and corporations such as ourselves--but what you do not fully comprehend, my dear Terry, is that we hate and distrust *you* just as much. But more than hate and distrust you--we simply want you out of our line of vision. You're a *freak*. Your lifestyle and values contrast too radically from our own to make anything more than a passing association with us stick. We cannot understand why you do not see things our way...it almost feels as if you are passing judgment on us by your failure to share our views and participate in our rituals. And so to quell any lingering self-doubts we might have, any insecurities...we *destroy* you. We remove you from our vision. But the story remains with us, as part of the New Eden stable of projects and potentials. Oh, you might try to reclaim your story or position yourself for a cut of our profits by some sort of legal battle--but we're comfortable enough in the opinion that you

aren't strong enough for such a fight. You're *weak*, Terry--one of the weak. You won't fight us. You'll merely crawl back to your pathetic little cadre of loser associates and cry and bitch about how we *fucked* you, how Big Bad Hollywood fucked you. And indeed, we *will* have fucked you--but to us it's like a playboy fuck, hardly noticeable or remembered. But *you* will remember, I'm sure. Perhaps it will drive you to drink, or to rapidly progress your all-too-apparent neurosis into a full-blown depressive episode. If we're lucky, you'll blow your brains out--if we're unlucky, our studio guards will stop you at the gate and smash your kneecaps. Either way we're kind of lucky, but best of all you'll have proved that our Way is the correct one and yours only leads to dissipation and collapse. Nice doing business with you, Terry. We count the minutes until you resign. Of course, we will continue to present you with the illusion of options, the illusion that somehow we actually *give* a shit about your 'vision'--but as time progresses and you witness the exquisite raping we have in mind for your project, we're confident you will be on the verge of a nervous breakdown and quit rather than suffer total mental collapse--which you might suffer afterwards anyhow, but at least we won't have to witness it. "

And then just as the alternate soundtrack ended, so too did the original:
"...and that's why I'm confident that we can come to an equitable compromise that is suitable to both parties."

But wasn't the alternate soundtrack a paranoid delusion, all in Terry's head? Even Terry himself wanted to believe so--at least that would denote a fairness and comprehension to the universe, even if it did condemn him personally as hopelessly neurotic. And so the man forced a softness to his face, managed a grin that was slightly unsettling, and slid a chip their way in a token of understanding and civility.

"Look, I'm sorry I'm being a hardass about this...I just want to work this out with you guys too. I realize my exact creative ideal is not going to see film, and I've always kind of realized this. It's just that sometimes you get so close to something that you can't see it clearly, you know? So...anyway, what along the lines of 'dark sensuality' do you *want* exactly?" He paused and rubbed his left

index finger mindlessly on the varnish of the table top. "I just need to get a bead on what it is you're looking for, and I can adjust accordingly."

There was an immediate release of tension in the room, and a pleased murmur spread about the various New Edeners. A sprinkling of smiles appeared among the faces, and Terry tried overly hard to reciprocate; his twitchy expression of amicability in stark contrast to the furrowed scowl upon William Burroughs on his T-shirt. The woman with the black hair turned to a petite Eurasian man wearing a discrete brown hearing aid and snapped her fingers at him; in response he dipped into a thick manila folder and pulled out a paperback novel. The man passed it to his table-neighbor, who passed it to her neighbor, who slid it across the table to someone else who passed it to his neighbor who passed it to the woman with black hair who stood up from her chair and handed it to Terry.

Terry looked at the cover. It read, "Interview With The Vampire."

*** *** ***

Malcolm was tired of waiting for Thane to get back to him with the number of a necromancer—old burned-out Thane, he probably had forgotten already, he wasn't very reliable.

Shit.

The body was lying under the Baphomet tapestry in the center of the floor; a black crisped ring finger and pinky peeking out from under the red material. Where part of the left leg of the form would be, there was nothing, the fabric lied flat. He hadn't looked at the face since he stole her from the vertical glass case in the Nine's gallery or laboratory or trophy room or school or whatever the hell it was. She had been there so long in the middle of his apartment that to put a coffee-table over her with a few old TV Guides, it would have been better—but he needed to see the draped figure, needed to have it in right in his face, needed it like a masochist needs it, needed it like the hopelessly guilty needs it, and he wasn't going to look at her face until it was Alive once more.

And it shouldn't be impossible, to bring her back from the dead, preferably whole and uncharred. After all he had seen, how *could* it be impossible?

Nothing was impossible.

And he wasn't crazy. He really *did* see and hear and experience those things, saw and heard and experienced it just like the stifling minutes ticking away now, in his apartment, standing before the body fully dressed with the red-and-black jacket and the leather vest ready to go out. He was going to go out. He was going to go out because though he spent the last weeks pouring through what grimoires that survived his skeptic's purge and the internet for a suitable reanimation spell and he couldn't find one and if he didn't get away from this body he was going to scream.

Not that he had any right to complain, of course. He *did* kill her, after all.

But as you have no doubt read over the last 550 pages or so, there were really good reasons for that.

The short blond man remembered the ticket Thane gave him. *Well, that's stupid to even think about*, he thought, *the date's probably expired*. He dug into his jacket pocket absently and pulled the golden rectangle of paper out. It read:

MIDNIGHT AT THE BIJOU!

ALL YOUR OLD-TIME FAVORITES

INCLUDING NEWSREEL

SIX DAYS A WEEK EXCEPT FOR SATURDAY, WHICH IS A

SABBATH

“Midnight movie, eh?” he muttered dubiously, the most exaggerated and blurry of reflections cast in the paper's gold foil surface. “Probably some Rocky Horror bullshit...” Then his expression brightened slightly. “Or maybe ‘Showgirls’...”

*** * * * *

It's good to do something bearing a resemblance to something normal for a change, he thought as he gave his ticket in to the transvestite behind the glass. The turnout for the show was spotty, and ducking into the darkened theater he couldn't help but feel like he was going to see a porno, where the house was rarely packed and everybody made sure to sit sufficiently away from each other.

And he couldn't help but still feel kinda scummy that he was catching a flick while Tara—that was her name, he was avoiding thinking of her name but that's what it was—was collecting dust-bunnies under the Satanic, er, I mean *Luciferian* flag. But what could he do? He was only a man. He was only a man, and he might even have to admit to himself that he couldn't bring somebody back from the dead. Maybe he had done enough, all he could do, fulfilled his destiny in the world.

“I’ve done all I can do,” he said, opening up a box of Twizzlers.

And yes, he stole the body from the Nine—but they probably already anticipated that. It was...a *test*, of some sort. They really didn’t think he’d actually *do* anything with it. He’d watch the movie and then just throw himself at their mercy—show them proper respect, burn some incense, throw some fatted calves on the stove. They ate that shit up.

Bring back Tara? Bring back Tara *why*? Wasn’t this story *over* already? What is this, a frickin’ Dickens novel?

Suddenly out of nowhere the sound of a full orchestra began to play fanfare; the sound-system must have been really good, because it felt as if they were all right there, in the shitty little Greenwich Village side-street theater.

A grainy film stock, full of scratches and hair, projected on the screen, followed by the image of a numerical countdown punctuated by old etchings of Indians, upside-down airplanes, and hearty bushel of corn. Then the screen read, above the logo of a spaceship around the moon,

FILMTONE NEWSTIME

BRINGING YOU THE WORLD OUTSIDE YOUR WINDOW!

Next came black-and-white footage of what looked like a Manhattan apartment building, the camera panning up to a certain floor with barred windows

and heavy drapes.

“Where is Terry Aprille,” asked the rather square-sounding male narrator, “and why won’t he write the ghastly-pulps that have thrilled the nation’s movie audiences for so long?”

Next came a shot of an animated, diminutive man with an unruly shock of graying hair, a hawkish nose, and thick glasses nearly jumping out of his seat, he was so enthusiastic.

“We asked Walter Burns, President of Pulsing Aorta Pictures, about the Terry that *he* knew, the one who went on to write such classics of the horror cinema such as ‘Pagan University,’ ‘Devil and Devilish,’ ‘Dracula Vs. Anubis,’ ‘Dracula Vs. Anubis II,’ ‘Dracula Vs. Anubis III: A New Beginning,’ and, of course, ‘The Sweet Hereafter.’”

“The first time I met Terry! I’ll never forget—it was the end of the day, the cleaning lady was nearly grabbing my balls on the way to remove the trash can from under my desk. And...this tall, unassuming young guy in a wrinkled trenchcoat pokes his head into my office, with this script he wanted me to see. He was so shy, self-effacing...it was like he was always apologizing for even being *born*, you know? But he sure could write a good decapitation scene!” The little goggle-eyed man on the screen smiled proudly. “And of course you know what that little script he was shopping around that day *became*, don’t you?” He leaned in confidentially. “*Valley Girl Zombies.*”

“Yes, *Terry Aprille*,” the narrator continued, stills of various horror movie posters fading in and out of the screen, “a young writer in the mid-80s whose original passion, short funny poems about the human experience, was soon traded in for a career in the splatter trade. After a series of rejection letters from every major literary journal across the country as well as Canada, Terry signed up with Burns and Pulsing Aorta. The rest, as they say, is *history.*”

“He was the only screenwriter I ever knew that made me throw up just reading his scripts,” Burns continued, his voice dubbed over a film clip of a vampire wrestling a mummy in a swimming pool. “I mean, he was *that* good. He had conceived of fates worse than death and ways to get impaled that I don’t

think have ever been thought up in the whole history of cinema. One-of-a-kind, a real powerhouse. It's too bad he don't write no more..."

The narrator continued, over a photo of Terry from the early 90s posing with a gaggle of smiling dead cheerleaders; the man in the picture was smiling, but it looked odd on him somehow, full of portent, like if he opened his mouth a dove might fly out.

"Which brings us back to the question: *What ever happened to Terry Aprille?* What sent him into hiding, a veritable Garbo locked away amongst his memorabilia, memories, and reportedly one of the best Wizard of Oz collections in North America? We looked to his old co-workers, Gil Arnold and Jerry Landon, for some answers."

A portly mustachioed gentleman in overalls and another fellow with the pleasant, Protestant face of an American farmer stood in front of a rack filled with severed body parts and fright masks.

"Well, I know that after he left us in '87 he had some trouble with Schreckton-Metroxy," the skinnier man said, a bloody arm making a bad tangent with his chest in the shot, as if growing out of his ribcage. "When he came back he said they stole the vampire story he did, and he was fighting with them in court to get it back. But I don't think he ever got it back."

"No, he n-n-never got it back," the other one stuttered, shaking his head in remembrance. "Later t-t-they p-p-puttttt-it on the air as a S-S-S-Sah-turday morning c-c-c-cartoon."

"He was really *bitter* after that."

It should be noted at this point that Malcolm Dust, who had nearly polished off his Twizzlers and was in the process of sucking some spit through the hollow center of a strand back-and-forth like he did when he was a kid, was one hair away from walking out of the theater. He loved glorious black-and-white as much as the next Luddite, but hated the pretentiousness of filming contemporary footage in that fashion as if the director was all *cool* and stuff. Besides, American cinema hadn't made a decent horror film since "Carnival of Souls," Romero having bastardized the entire genre in his opinion.

But since what awaited him upon his return to Lord of Illusions was a stack of unpaid bills and a stiff, *well...*

The screen then filled with an Italian poster for “The Sweet Hereafter,” (“Signore Spaventevole”), depicting a bone-white and shirtless raven-haired specter silhouetted against a night sky, his head thrown back like St. Sebastian and a broken bottle sticking out of his chest. The narrator continued,

“Then, in 1990, Aprille was to have what would be both his greatest triumph—and his greatest tragedy. His former fiancé Danielle Chu remembers...”

“He blamed himself for Rob Sullivan’s death,” a svelte, short-haired Asian woman dressed in an oversized boatnecked dark angora sweater spoke into the camera, “because he said if he had never written the movie, Rob never would have gotten killed...which is kind of *true*, actually. But not for the reasons he thought. *Terry*...he could get into this whole ‘mystical thing,’”—and as she said “mystical thing” she did this “Walk Like An Egyptian” move with her neck like she was jive-talking like she was Oprah keepin’ it real—“and he was very...

spiritual...which was fine! But...I think he might have took it too far.”

“What makes you say that,” the off-camera interviewer asked.

“Because...he thought that his work could effect reality...he thought that...since Rob’s character died in the movie, he died in real-life. Like he jinxed him. And he just...he just took Rob’s death really *hard*, because he felt really, really *close* to Rob...” The edge of her lippy mouth creased slightly. “...you know, like a *brother*.”

“Yeah, Terry went batshit after Rob bought it,” Walter Burns continued, “He was held up in this beach house for weeks, we never heard from him so I sent Gil and Jerry after him. We were taking bets on whether he had killed himself or not and if so by what ingenious means...it’s not that we’re heartless, it’s just that we’re working in blood and filth all the time, gives us a bit of the gallows humor.”

“...but together we worked *through* those issues,” Danielle Chu’s voice spoke over a picture of a blond Rob Sullivan and Terry posing in front of a car,

Terry's face slightly blurry and dynamic, as if he was turning around and had gotten surprised. "He was, in the end, able to 'forgive' himself for Rob's death—so I thought, at any rate—and accept the surprise success of the movie. After that business with Schreckton-Metroxy, it was a bit of a triumph. And things were *good...*" Her large almond-eyes subtly glanced away from the screen. "*Then...*"

"Zippy was a *great* girl," Burns enthused, wiping some spittle away from his mouth with the cuff of his shirt, "Zippy—that's what we used to call Tzipporah—was a great talent in her own right. And still is! Started here as an intern. Corman had Howard and Coppola, I had Aprille and Kaufman." The scene switched to a photo of a rail-thin teenager with a long, pointed nose, waist-length wavy blond hair topped with a beret, and a "Suspiria" T-shirt; she faced the viewer confidently, her bony arms folded in front of her. "Zippy was a really good kid, turned out to be a top-notch matte artist and blood F/X impressario. I don't know what exactly happened. It could have been drugs."

The screen now suddenly went black and in tiny white letters was the following legend:

"In 1996 Terry Aprille went missing for a period of four months, during which time he was held against his will in Tzipporah Kaufman's basement, fed a diet of La Yogurt, bananas, and chocolate-covered macadamia nuts, and had strips of his skin from his nipples to his groin carefully flayed off. He would later credit his liberation to a pair of time-travelers from another dimension, but such rantings are understandable due to the extreme mental duress he was under at the time. Tzipporah was arrested and later was found not guilty by reason of insanity; she now lives in a residence for the criminally-insane and sells her paintings from her cell through a broker, and has an impressive celebrity clientele. Her most sought-after works, which, as of this writing, are still kept by the authorities, are a series of large canvases painted with Aprille's blood.

Terry Aprille no longer writes horror stories."

Then a close-up of the words THE END superimposed on an animated graphic of a rocket-ship flying around a moon...

"Must have been a homo," Malcolm said under his breath, regarding his empty Twizzler box with a soft-edged fury.

AND NOW FOR OUR FEATURE

PRESENTATION

*** *** ***

PULSING AORTA FILMS PRESENTS

A WALTER BURNS FILM

BASED ON A STORY BY TERRY APRILLE

STARRING

MOLLY GRIEP

TARA AMADEO

AND THAT CUTE GOTH BOY FROM THE LIBRARY

“RETURN To LUNA PARK”

Molly always hated the 1950's-style flocked bunny-rabbit wallpaper in her room, ever since she was a little kid. When subtly peeling off the horror in thin strips failed to produce the desired effect (as well as failing to escape her parents' notice), she resorted to building elaborate collages over it, and those collages reflected her current interests at that particular state of development. At the moment, only a few months into The Change, the images on her wall consisted of vampires, fairies, brave knights, The Sweet Hereafter, and purported witch's symbols as depicted in Scott Cunningham's "Solitary Magic."

Tara, in her long "Winnie the Pooh" nightshirt and signature owl's glasses, was in awe.

"You can do it *too*, Tara," Molly said, rolling a piece of scotch tape into a circle and affixing it to the back of a picture from the movie "The Craft" that was embellished with glitter and feathers.

The awkward taller girl shook her head bashfully.

“N’aw...my Mom would kill me if I ruined the wall with tape marks...”

“See, that’s your whole problem, Tara—your Mom is running your life!”

Molly stuck the clipping, an image of four girls sitting around a ritual circle, next to a head-shot of The Sweet Hereafter cut from a newspaper. The short, round-headed blond girl was only knee-deep in the Change at the moment, and while she wore a rather conservative pink lace nightgown her granny-glasses were gone, her usually plaited hair unbound, and a queer little felt bag filled with herbs tied around her neck. “We should really get our own place...then we can fix it just the way we want...live completely authentically!”

Tara didn’t answer but merely nodded in a non-committed assent that was as good as useless; to a technical adult who only recently and with great trepidation learned how to scramble eggs for the first time, the thought of moving out and getting her own place was just too overwhelming. A rather odd, out-of-place picture caught her eye, and she pointed to it on the wall.

“Who’s that?”

It was of a stocky, middle-aged auburn-haired woman with a taller, younger woman with a mullet.

“Just some picture I saw in the Times, I thought it was interesting. She’s a writer, Dorothy Allison? I just thought she had an interesting face. I’m writing about this character now, she’s kind of an older woman who’s been through a lot in life, and that woman reminded me of her.”

“Is that character part of our book?”

Molly tucked a lock of hair around her ear and got up to press in a corner of the “Craft” picture that was sticking out.

“Sort of. I haven’t figured it all out yet.”

The blond woman had finally convinced her friend to brave the long, unfamiliar bus ride and visit her at her house in Canarsie. There was the promise of magick to be learnt, and the carrot thus dangled, the agoraphobe finally

assented to the harrowing trip. Which reminded her...

“So,” Tara said, sitting on the edge of the bed, trying to be nonchalant and failing miserably, “about that spell you were going to teach me...”

Molly looked back at her with a tight, inscrutable smile.

“First thing’s first, babe...how’s those sketches coming along?”

The brunette had dreaded this.

“I...I have them, but...I really think I need more time to...”

“Screw time,” the blond answered, grabbing a plastic bag from the floor and pulling a pad of bristol out of it.

And so Molly slowly, unbearably, in her anxious friend’s estimation, perused the drawings; Tara followed eagerly every nuance, every wrinkle in the other girl’s face as each sheet of paper was thrown back and a new one scrutinized. It was so important to the girl to make her companion happy, even with such a pathetic talent.

But Molly was unreadable, and so Tara naturally assumed the worst; assuming the worst was her default position in life, and it rarely failed her, and, once in a blue moon, even surprised her with its failing.

“This is Pris, huh?”

The taller girl craned her head over to regard the sketch of the tiny woman with short black hair.

“Yes? Do you like it?”

Molly rubbed her lower lip thoughtfully.

“Not bad...it’s pretty much how I envisioned it. But make the tits smaller. She’s not a big-titted character.”

“Okay, no problem, let me just write this down...”

“You don’t need to write it down—it’s simple, small boobies...”

“Right, small boobies...”

The blond flipped the page.

"And next we have Mia...hmm...I don't know about this forehead..."

To Tara's horror Molly grabbed a pencil from her night-table and began erasing the upper- half of the long-haired, rather depressed-looking character's face; that was Molly for you, could never leave anything alone, always had to leave her stamp, always had to be right, and it drive the other woman crazy and also made her feel guilty as hell for having those negative feelings, for being so damn ungrateful.

And so it went through the sketch pad, through all of the major characters of the comic book: Gabriel, Kinky, Rache (whose image Molly was particularly hard on, erasing everything but the ears and feet), and the rest. And when it was done—or rather, a respectful, measured time after it was done—Tara again inquired about the spell.

Molly fairly snorted in response.

"God, Tara, don't you get it? What we're doing with this book?"

The taller woman's dark eyes ran searchingly, cluelessly over her companion's face.

"Um...trying to be famous?"

"Magick! Don't you see?! Haven't you been listening to anything I've taught you, has any of it sank in? Magick is more than just candles and shit! You don't need that shit to do magick! That's obvious shit! What's the most important ingredients in magick? Intention, focus, personal investment, creative visualization...what better way to do it than a work of art, right? Don't you see what I'm getting at?" Molly scooted over in close to her friend in a way that was markedly non-sensual, and jabbed her repeatedly in the arm with her elbow. "Don't you see? Don't you get it? Revenge on stupid ol' Professor West, money, respect, love, lust, everything—don't you see? What this book really is?" The blond woman's blue eyes shone like twin electric charges. "The story is a force!"

The harsh beam of an usher's flashlight fell on Malcolm Dust.

*** *** ***

The black woman with the shells in her hair was going to give it one more try with Molly, who had been given several chances and pissed them all away. The latest offense was indeed the worst, and expressed a total lack of rehabilitation. Oh, the dark-skinned lady assumed that they could always just leave Ms. Griep in here, in this place, out of trouble—but such endings are illusions. There must be resolution. It *begs* resolution.

“Molly, why are you here?”

“I’m not here,” the blond woman said in a distant, distracted voice.

“Where are you, then?”

“I’m watching a movie.”

“What movie are you watching?”

“I’m watching the main feature, now. *Shhhh.*”

“I can’t ‘shhhh,’ Molly. I have to help you. I have to resolve this.”

“It’s resolved.”

“No. It’s not. Because you broke the rule. And so now we have to resolve this.”

“You can tell them they can have the body back.”

“It’s not that *simple*, Molly.”

“They can have the body back...I don’t want to bring her back anymore.”

“No?”

“No.”

“So we’ll leave her dead, then?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll leave her dead, then? A shade in Hades?”

“She means nothing to me,” Molly answered, looking away from her interrogator and folding her hands in her lap.

“Where are you now, Molly?”

“I’m watching a movie.”

“What are you seeing?”

“I’m seeing myself.”

“What are you doing?”

“I am opening the door...and I find Tara and that boy...that boy I *like*...screwing on the floor. And I freak out. And me and Tara argue in the kitchen, and...” Molly looked up at the woman, clearly agitated. “...a-and I take a knife from the counter and...”

“Say it...”

“...and I save the world. My name is Malcolm Dust and I saved the world.”

*** *** ***

The beginning of the end of Goth, a road that would lead through vampire killers, Christian backlash, hits by the Trenchcoat Mafia, and Marilyn Manson’s unruly pecker, happened in a Flatbush apartment shared by two women who, the investigation would reveal, were heavily involved in the occult. The one girl, in a fit of jealous rage, had stabbed her roommate to death, apparently ingested some LSD, and was found standing over the body within an inverted pentagram drawn on the floor with a Sharpie, blood from her roommate’s gnawed jugular all over her mouth. The killer would later say that she was set off by a homosexual advance from her roomie that caught her unawares.

And, somewhere in all of this, “The Sweet Hereafter” was blamed as being a bad influence leading to obsession and homicide, thus adding to Terry Aprille’s vast reservoir of Guilt.

And so Tara Amadeo became a shade in Hades for a period of time not exceeding 10 years.

*** *** ***

“Malcolm Dust does not exist, Molly.”

“That’s not so. He lives in the basement of a store he bought with his meager savings and an advance on his inheritance from his folks. His hobbies include magick, collecting old photographs of defunct amusement parks, and reading spurious third-hand accounts of Hitler’s last days in the bunker. He has a body type prone to sponginess around the middle, loses hair when under stress, and has an average-sized, freckled, uncircumcised penis nicknamed ‘Mr. Winchell.’ You can’t make stuff like that up.”

“You can if you’re a talented writer.”

And then Molly let it fall down, let it finally fall down, and her mouth grimaced in pain and her eyes attained a level of honesty and naked despair that she had never shown, all these years, all these years that she let the Story coddle her. And the whites of her eyes began to fill with dozens of tiny capillary explosions as they filled with brine, as she set palette against palette in that tight, grimacing, pain-wracked mouth and begged,

“Let me stay there...”

The older woman across the file-stacked table looked at her sympathetically.

“It’s not a stable world.”

“I d-don’t care...I don’t fucking care...just send me back there...send me back...”

“Have you ever read ‘Crisis On Infinite Earths?’”

“I WANT TO GO BACK!!!!”

*** *** ***

The first thing Malcolm Dust did when he found himself suddenly back in Lord of Illusions is to run downstairs to his basement apartment, ransack his closet, and pull out a shoebox full of old mementoes and photographs in order to prove to himself he was really himself and not someone else. And indeed, the ephemera, complete with the man's rolled-up high-school diploma, family photos, and old driver's licenses, all pointed to the fact that he was Malcolm Dust and no other, especially not some whacked-out chick who killed her roommate.

But his reassurance was short-lived when he realized that if Tara, as the said dead roommate, was indeed killed so many years ago...who was that under the tapestry of Baphomet?

He remembered the tall No-Man's admonition not to look back, not to return, even as he walked towards the body, even as he noted with a stifled terror that the form beneath the cloth had both legs intact, even as he noted with a stifled horror that the fingers that peeked out were no longer charred but smooth and white...

Are you going to leave her, then, a shade in Hades?

He was not Molly Griep. He didn't even know who she was. He was being bewitched into doubting his identity, bewitched into thinking he could do something like murder somebody in cold blood. Don't you see? It was Luna Park. They did the Great Working in Luna Park and it rent time and space and now...and now, who could tell who was really who anymore? What did it matter, the lives he had supposedly been, and the events of the past? All he had was this moment, and all he knew was what he was right now...

Are you going to leave her, then, a shade in Hades?

No. No more running, and he knew the cost.

And he lifted the tapestry, and found the pale body of Mia Cefalu, clad in a soft white sweater stained with blood and a pair of jeans.

And he recognized Mia because she was a character in that comic book he and Tara were working on...a character in that story that Schreckton-Metroxy stole from Terry Aprille...

And he recognized Mia because when Tara drew her, she based the tall brunette on herself...

And suddenly Mia/Tara was sitting at a desk, somewhere, in a foreign place Malcolm had never seen before, and she was white and sick-looking and her spine was bent over the keyboard and she looked not at her visitor or indeed even acknowledged his approach but kept her eyes on the computer, on the steadily swelling document on the screen...

And sitting across from Tara was Lucifer, and the red creature goaded her on to continue writing not with a whip, not with threats or candy, but by the unsaid, implicit understanding that she would simply die if she failed.

And the pasty-skinned woman whose dry, worn fingers worked the keys felt Malcolm's warm hand on her rounded shoulder, and she said,

“End it. There has to be an end. You don’t know what I’ve been though.”

“I...I don’t know *how* to end it...”

“*End it*,” she repeated, as forcefully as her emaciated frame could bear.

And suddenly it was Gabriel standing behind her, and the boy, not really proficient in anything else, did the only thing he knew how...and bit her on the neck.

Only, instead of draining her blood...he shot it into her body.

And from the wound color sprang into every limb, every cell, every strand of hair--and she became alive once more. And it didn’t matter who she was before or what had happened in the past, because she knew who she was right now.

*** *** ***

“Malcolm?!” the tall brunette in the white sweater and jeans shouted out, dropping to her knees at the bone-white figure on the floor of his store, where the woman found herself conscious in. If not for the faintest twitch of his pulse, it would have been certain that the man was dead. She cradled his limp head in her hands. “Malcolm?!”

So engrossed she was at the matter at hand that she failed to notice how the ceiling of Lord of Illusions was cracking—not the thin, fairy’s web cracks of time march march marching on but deep structural faults of the kind that heralded immanent destruction. And as the walls started shaking, and pipes suddenly crashing through the plaster, and the landscape outside the storefront window rolling up and crashing to the sidewalk like yesterday’s movie, Roy appeared, because that’s what Roys do.

“This world is becoming irrelevant and it’s time to go now,” he said to the woman who was frantically trying to lift Malcolm’s body up to his feet and pull him away to where she did not know. “Leave him.”

The woman shook some plaster dust from her face.

“He’s still breathing!”

“He does not exist. *Malcolm Dust does not exist!*”

Tara’s brown eyes regarded the man in his arms and made the decision.

“I don’t care!”

And she dragged him off into the basement, each step disintegrating as she left it.

“Humans...” Roy growled, slapping himself in the forehead with his hand and dematerializing just as the bathtub from two floors up fell into the cash-register.

*** *** ***

I AM Malcolm Dust, the man thought to himself earnestly in his unconscious reverie, if I wasn't how could I dream? How can characters dream? How...

It was as if someone had pulled open the lampshade to an unbearably sunny day, and the blond bearded man woke to rumbling, dark reality, and the sensation of a warmth—

He tried to put his hand to his temple but he could barely lift it, it was like he had the strength of a baby.

“Uhn...where...”

“In the closet. We’re in the closet.”

“Tara? How...”

“You did it, Dr. Frankenstein,” she said snarkily, pinching him on the cheek, “you brought me back from the dead and everything.”

The man’s face creased into a hesitant, yet genuine smile.

“Really? I...that’s *wonderful*, that means everything is—wait, why are we in the closet? And what the hell is that *racket*? ”

“Oh, the world’s ending.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“Yeah. Sorry about trying to destroy the world and all.”

“Well...sorry for stabbing you.”

“S’okay. Anyway...I just wanted to tell you, Malcolm, that even though we’ve had our ups and downs and such, well, you’re *ok*. And that...I really *do* think you have an independent existence outside of a guilt-ravaged killer’s delusion.”

“I...I *appreciate* that. I only...wish I had more time to know you better.”

“Likewise.”

“So how much more time to you think we’ve got?”

And a long, metallic arm burst through the top of the closet, grabbed Tara by the left leg, and yanked her up. Along the way she made a mad grab at Malcolm, hooking her fingers around his head and inside his nose, and let go only when the man shrieked that she was tearing his head off.

EPILOGUE

Local Horror Writer Trades Death For Dolls

by Stephanie Weisenheimer

Mia Cefalu is known for her tales of the undead, sex, the occult—but says that such topics are definitely *not* on her docket for the future.

“I don’t really *do* vampires anymore,” the brunette with the long hair says with an apologetic grin. She is a soft-spoken woman in her early 30s whose gentle, unassuming nature is belied only by the ouroboros tattooed around her right arm. Of course, there are also the scars: after nearly dying in a car accident a little more than three years ago, the author has had to deal with not only a severe leg fracture resulting in her dependence on a cane but slight brain damage as well.

“I was pretty much ready to bite the hollow end of a barrel when I found out,” Cefalu recalls of the day she was told of the extent of her injuries, “because they had no idea how it was going to effect me, other than it was going to effect me. I thought I wouldn’t be able to write. I thought things would never return to normal.” The statuesque woman, clad in faded

jeans and a T-shirt advertising “Shore’s End,” a popular eatery here at the Cape, pauses and puts her finger to her lips in thought. “And, you, know, they didn’t. Return to normal. But I was able to write. My writing actually got *better*, in fact. Before--all I was able to write were short, funny poems on the human experience and stuff. But once my entire world was destroyed--being in constant physical pain, suddenly jobless, with a millimeter or so of gray matter removed--actually, I became quite focused.” She pushes back some of the hair from the left side of her head, revealing a thick scar running from the top of her scalp to just behind her ear. “I look like frickin’ Frankenstein, over here.”

For those unfamiliar with the novel, “Fools and Vampires” is a ribald, violent, at times darkly-comedic look at the rivalry between two vampire clans.

“Conservatives hate it. Liberals hate it. Middle-of-the-roaders hate it. Christians hate it. Wiccans hate it. Anne Rice fans hate it. My mother hates it. Sometimes, even *I* hate it. A small cadre of like-minded individuals, God help us all, are obsessed with it. I’ve done my job.”

We are speaking in the “Doll Room” of her modest two-

story beach-front home; its rough-hewn, lacquered pine walls are lined top-to-bottom with thin metal shelves, the type one might find in a library...only one-time bibliophile Cefalu has recently found a new passion.

“Barbie...is so much *more* than merely 11.5 inches of vinyl,” Cefalu comments, holding up a doll dressed in a pink rodeo clown outfit. “She’s...the Everywoman that all of us can project our innermost feelings, desires, and dreams upon. She can be a doctor or a policewoman or an astronaut or even Erica Kane—the possibilities are endless. And she fills a very deep need in my life.”

I look at the 200 or so blond-haired, blue-eyed dolls propped up with kaiser stands all around the room’s perimeter.

“Very impressive.”

“Thank-you.”

“But what about the *vampires*?”

“Like I said, I no longer write about vampires. Part of my recovery was the realization that I had the power to keep or discard the negative influences that were dogging my life. And—with the help of my honey Frank, of course—I believe I have successfully beat those demons.”

I turn the conversation to what I assume were one of those demons she has been in the process of discarding during her period of reevaluation and subsequent rebirth—her legal battle with entertainment mega-conglomerate Schreckton-Metroxy.

She straightens the red rubber nose on the face of the doll in her hand.

“I have...no ill-will or bitter feelings towards Schreckton-Metroxy. Why *should* I? They were only doing what they do, for them and theirs. How can I blame something for being what it is?”

“Do you believe in moral relativism, Mrs. Cefalu?”

“I believe in Barbie.”

*** *** ***

Our conversation is cut short when Cefalu stands up and says she thought she just saw something on fire fall into the water. She grabs her cane and runs the best she can out of the house onto the sand, and down, down the beach until she

reaches a large stone wall and cannot run any further. And twenty feet or so out on the water the smoking capsule of a rocket ship floats, inscribed in the letters of an unidentifiable language. And a little door pops open on the capsule, and a helmeted figure in an odd, purple spacesuit with more of the mystery writing printed on its surface stumbles out and splashes stiffly into the water. And the figure approaches Mia, pulling on the helmet at the neck and slowly prying it off.

And Mia throws her head back and laughs.

THE END

Then the mysterious figure in the purple spacesuit pulled Mia down to the depths! Frank, who had been busy making some yummy goat-cheese fritters at the time, said:

“Holy God, are you altering the text?!”

Frank threw off his white chef’s hat and ran out of the beach-house after Mia, stumbling over sand and small pebbles.

“Don’t you remember what Roy said about adding-to or altering the text?”

And Frank screamed into the blank horizon and flat waters:

“FUCK!”

Meanwhile, Terry Aprille found himself in a boardroom. He was looking much healthier, far healthier than he had appeared in a decade at least.

Terry said:

“It’s like I can’t even believe I’m here.”

As soon as Terry arrived, they made sure he had a nice fresh cup of coffee to cradle in his long hands.

“No, I can’t believe I’m here at all. And yet I must be. I can feel the heat off this cup.”

The woman with the pageboy and the pearls said:

“It’s what my momma always used to say: heat is real, cold is death.”

Terry’s pants buzzed. He took his phone out of his pocket and looked at the name on the screen:

F CEFALU

Terry made a mental note to answer that call later. Then he said:

“I’m full of good ideas now.”

“We know you are, Terry.”

“It’s like everywhere I go: I have these ideas. For stories. They’re everywhere. They unfurl from my napkin like maps, rolling forth from my knife and fork.”

“That’s from a poem you wrote in college.”

“I know. It feels good now, like when I was in college. Like I’m still writing poetry.” Terry wrapped his wiry digits tighter around the cup, soaking in all that reassuring heat. “I was scared at first, to take that next step, to trust in it...”

The woman with the pageboy unclasped her pearls from the nape of her neck and let the tiny spheres rain down on the shiny long table. Terry’s pants buzzed again:

PICK UP?

“I’m living in a dozen little planets,” Terry said as his eyes followed all the spheres at once, “Worlds in miniature I created myself. And it’s all OK. I created these worlds. I finally found my purpose.”

The pearls dove deep into the greenish water, and Terry flew in like a fish after them, following all paths at once.

“THE END OF THE VAMPIRE CRAZE IN NEW YORK CITY”

IS NOW FINISHED

